resistance

by silkinsilence

Summary

It wasn't exactly love. There just wasn't a better word for it.

Notes

A collection of drabbles based on Ozai’s Angels. Enjoy!
They weren’t friends. Had they ever been friends? Maybe a long, long time ago, before Mai and Ty Lee left, before Azula came to the deadly conclusion that emotions were weakness and friendship was a luxury for those of lesser standing.

Mai still spent time in those uncomfortable memories. Even with Zuko by her side, even with the assurance that her current relationship was a healthy one, the poison wouldn’t be washed free from her system.

Mai hadn’t been clueless. She had suspected something of Azula’s twisted obsession with her. Azula had sought her out, not vice versa. Azula had come to her more than once, demanding to know whether Mai preferred Zuko or Azula. And every time, Mai had managed to weasel her way out of answering. She liked Zuko, but making an enemy of the princess was a horrible idea.

And sooner or later, refusing to deny Azula turned into something else. Even then, even as a child, Mai had suspected that she and Ty were just dolls to Azula, just things to be played with and cast away. But Azula’s games weren’t always unpleasant, and there were days when Mai would have been hard-pressed to name which royal sibling was her favorite.

The years when they were apart hadn’t ended the game.

Azula had grown, mind and body. And this time, her kisses weren’t quite as harmless. Mai found resistance difficult and pointless, but she still found herself hating herself for enjoying it, for enjoying the look on Azula’s face and Ty’s limber form and the way they all came together in dim rooms lit by candles with blue flames. Hair, light brown and dark brown and black, all intertwined, woven together as if they came from one head.

Azula was vicious and petty. The taunts and barbs, physical and verbal, piled up. Mai hardened her skin, pretending they didn’t hurt. She missed Zuko, whose words were only unintentionally hurtful. And yet she didn’t entirely hate the feud, the verbal duels that too often progressed into something physical.

She hated loving it, and told herself she didn’t love it.

Now, even with Zuko by her side, even with Azula in the asylum, Mai couldn’t entirely forget the taste of the princess’s lips, the heat in her fingertips, and the soft and deadly whispers in her ear.

She wouldn’t ever tell Azula the truth.

*You were right about me.*

*I liked your games.*
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

I was wrong about you.

Mai was many things.

Mai was sharp and quiet and subdued and calculating and strong and intelligent. Mai was beautiful and graceful and more than worthy of being the Fire Lady. The only question was whether she would be at Zuko’s right hand or Azula’s, sharing the seat with Ty Lee.

Her quiet power was one of many things Azula loved about Mai. She was capable of saying many things with silence; each of her movements contained a multitude of clues as to what she was thinking or feeling. It only made sense for a child who had been raised in such a confined environment to end up so passive-aggressive. And Azula took advantage of Mai’s passivity. She would see how far she could go, exactly how much pressure it took to make Mai snap.

It took a lot.

It took careless touches and suggestive glances, eyes drifting where they never should have gone. It took a bit of fire and a bit of ice. Ultimately, Azula found herself disappointed, when she and Mai lay intertwined, skin on skin, and still Mai was a statue. Still her mask was unbroken.

Gradually Azula began to suspect that she was not the only one of the three who wore an excellent façade. Little by little, she began to suspect that Mai’s might have been stronger, more complete.

*What are you hiding from me?* she asked, in the form of bites where she dug her teeth in deeper and deeper each time. *Show me what you really are. Show me what you really want,* she demanded, when her fingers made Mai’s control weaken, when Mai’s back bowed and her breath came in short, unrestrained gasps.

Are you thinking about me?

Are you thinking about him?

Azula depended on Mai’s intelligence. If it were not for her mind, Azula would have never allowed the other girl near her. Mai loved Zuko, but Mai was smart. Azula was stronger. Azula could kill Mai; Azula could kill Zuko. So Mai played along, did as she was told, and Azula convinced herself that Mai was too smart to quit the game.

Ty Lee was the buffer. In between the two, she stopped them from destroying each other. Mai and Azula were both cold, both sharp, Azula pushing and pushing and Mai taking and taking. Perhaps Ty had seen the signs. Perhaps she had realized what lay behind Mai’s mask. Perhaps she didn’t want Azula to push Mai to the breaking point.

Whatever Ty Lee’s intentions, they were all for nothing in the end. All the hugs and kisses she had dealt out ended up having no impact on reality.

Azula pushed too hard. Mai snapped. The façade broke. Mai wasn’t smart.
You miscalculated.

Azula hated thinking about her, more than anything else. She had been a fool. She had depended on Mai saving her own skin. She had seen Mai’s mind. It had drawn them together in the beginning. But Mai had proven to be every bit as foolish as everybody else.

I was wrong about you.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

This cancels out the hurt.

It was something they didn’t discuss.

They saw the marks he left on her. They saw the bruises and the burns, the trail of bite marks down her neck. They saw the cuts where his fingernails had dug into her skin. Azula never brought them up. Once, just once, Ty Lee had dared to ask whether Azula wasn’t hurting, ignoring the warning look on Mai’s face.

The glare in those bright golden eyes had been more than enough to end that topic forever.

Despite herself, despite knowing that she was supposed to ignore them, Ty Lee couldn’t help leaving kisses on each and every bruise, each and every dark, painful spot on Azula’s skin. She imagined Ozai’s fingers there, gripping too tightly, painfully, and planted her lips there instead. Her care couldn’t take the marks away, but she wanted to abate the pain. For every careless scar Ozai left on his daughter, Ty Lee left a purposeful declaration of commitment.

*I care about you. I want to see your skin whole and undamaged. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be left alone.*

Azula didn’t always go along with Ty Lee’s gentle ministrations. She wasn’t always content to lie back and let the lips ghost over her skin. Some days, she was angry. Some days, she was as vicious as her father.

Azula left marks on both of them, Mai and Ty Lee alike. Her fingers made bruises and her too-hot hands made burns. She dug her teeth into their throats and shoulders and sucked and sucked as if she would take their breath away. The heat on her skin was vicious, uncontrollable.

It scared Ty Lee. There was too much to Azula; there was too much boiling underneath the surface. Ozai had put a kettle over a flame and never come back to fetch it.

She didn’t care that many nights she had to nurse her own small injuries. Azula only held so tightly because she had to know that something was there. Azula only hurt because she had been hurt herself. If it would relieve the pressure to be Azula’s punching bag, Ty Lee thought she was willing to make that sacrifice.

“Are you all right? She’s really done a number on you.” Mai’s voice was quiet, but Ty Lee always heard her.

“What? It’s no problem at all! They don’t hurt at all, I promise!”

Ty Lee wasn’t as good at lying as Azula.

Mai said that if she resisted enough, Azula wouldn’t push as hard. And it was true that Mai didn’t ever look as if she had been attacked by a ravenous beast, which was how Mai described Ty Lee after her encounters with the princess.
But Ty Lee didn’t want to push back. She would take and take as much as was necessary. She would bring it on herself, not out of some sense of masochism but because she thought Azula needed it. Every night, after Ozai was done with Azula, Azula came to Ty Lee, and Ty Lee did what she could to help Azula forget the marks her father left.

*Let me cancel out the hurt.*
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

I need to want you.

Mai thought frequently about it.

The three of them were similar in ways none of them would admit. Mai’s parents were caring but stifling, more in love with the idea of a child than the reality of it. She had never made friends easily, mostly for a lack of trying. Before Azula and Ty Lee, Mai had never had close friends.

Were they close, she wondered? Or was that just a pretense that all of them had grown used to upholding? It didn’t really take emotional closeness to do the things they did, to lay lips on skin and touch flesh to flesh.

Ty Lee had no identity and no voice in her family. She was one among many, essentially interchangeable with the next daughter. And yet she was the outgoing one of the trio, the one who laughed honestly and smiled easily and made friends with whomever came within her reach. She wore her friendliness like a shield. And like a shield, it kept people at a distance. Ty Lee had many friends, and almost no true friends.

Was she just smiling for Azula’s benefit? Was she simply with them out of fear? Was there nothing underneath her hugs and kind words? Yet she was the one who seemed to enjoy the game the most. Ty Lee didn’t push or pull the way Mai and Azula did. She let herself be swept into their embraces. She didn’t fight it.

And then there was the princess herself. Azula never talked about her problems; Azula never talked about her feelings. But Mai knew that Azula had nobody but Ozai, and Ozai’s love was the same as Mai’s parents’ love—conditional.

They were all alone, the three, each with her own goals, each with her own desperate dreams. Even as they kissed, spent long nights in each other’s arms, traded touches and caresses, their minds were all elsewhere.

Mai dreamed of Zuko, of the only relationship she had ever known that wasn’t tainted. He had been a friend, and then something more, and though he was hard-headed and impulsive and selfish he cared about her, which was more than she could say for anyone else.

Ty Lee dreamed of the circus, the life she had made for herself, freedom. She didn’t want to be one among many. She didn’t want to blend in to her sisters. She wanted her escape and her liberty, and she had gone after it with her own hands and feet and heart.

Azula dreamed of her father and her future. She dreamed of Ozai’s praise, of coming home to happiness, of the crown that would one day be hers. Occasionally, Ursa would worm her way into the dreams, inevitably leaving Azula feeling cold and melancholy.

But none of them had what they wanted. Ty Lee had been dragged away from her freedom. Mai was complicit in the pursuit of the only person she truly cared about. And Azula spent every
waking moment knowing that the longer it took her to carry out her mission, the more Ozai would lose faith in her.

They only had each other, broken people with broken dreams, and they held onto it as tightly as they could, all of them terrified of ripping the fabric of the illusion.

*I need to want you.*
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

You can be like me.

The opposites came together in an uneasy truce, a truce negotiated by fire and fists, of power and a lack thereof, of malice and caring.

Their original goals and desires were set aside until it was only the present moment that mattered. They came together in dimly lit rooms and under thin sheets, in secluded corners and under the broad blue sky. They touched and kissed and bit with all the fervor and passion in the world, clothes or no clothes, lips finding lips and hips finding hips, a dialogue where each was attempting to convince the other.

I want to help you.

Ty Lee often felt that she knew Azula better than anybody else did. She had been by the princess’s side when they were children, and their relationship had started from that point when they met again as allies. Unlike Mai, who was caught between the family’s two siblings, a pawn constantly being pulled at by both sides, Ty Lee had no other allegiances. She cared about Azula. She truly, truly cared.

She was willing to let Azula order her around like a dog. She would follow every order to the best of her capabilities. Fear? Yes. She feared Azula and what she was capable of. But more than anything, Ty Lee feared for Azula’s own sake. She was too close to the edge and pushing herself closer. Ty Lee wanted to be underneath to catch her.

She endured the bites and the bruises, and being fucked by Azula wasn’t only pain. When the princess’s fingers, blazing hot, trailed over her collarbone and her breasts, Ty Lee forgot herself. She let herself be lost in the sensations. Sex was simple. They came together and understood each other. Ty Lee took it all, one thought left in her mind.

You can be like me.

It was cruel, and Azula knew it. Ty Lee was her scratching post, her punching bag. She had taken out her frustrations on her own skin in the past, and now she took them out on Ty Lee. Every kiss was meant to bruise, every caress laced with blue flame. She looked at Ty Lee’s skin, marred with small injuries, and the sight brought vicious pride and heinous satisfaction together in her.

Everything he did to me, I’ll do to her.

She couldn’t escape her father’s shadow. Even when it was just her and Ty Lee and the cover of night and darkness, she felt Ozai’s presence. He was always there, and especially there when Azula began kissing her friends. What would he think of her? What would he say to her?

She was simply passing on the favor. Her father had ground his pain into her, and she was handing the burden on to others. But she was different—she made sure they enjoyed it, and that was almost the ultimate rush. They were under her fingers, under her control. She could control it, and that
made her feel safer.

*I want to corrupt you.*

Mai walked in on them (more than once), and when it was all over, the three of them tangled together, she spoke.

“You both looked so…intense.”

Azula laughed, patronizing, patting one hand against Mai’s dark hair.

“Don’t be so melodramatic. It’s only *sex.*”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

I want to need you.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for self-harm.

This is my daughter. She’s very pretty, isn’t she?

My daughter scored highest in her class on last week’s test.

She has manners. She knows when to speak and when to stay silent. Smile for them. Smile for them. No—not like that. I’m sorry; I don’t know what’s gotten into her. Go to bed without dinner tonight.

What was left inside of her that her parents hadn’t stomped out?

Whenever Mai smiled, she remembered her mother’s reproaching her for never showing her teeth. Whenever she laughed, she remembered her father’s stern adage that children should be seen and not heard.

Mai couldn’t really remember crying as a child. The instant she had, she knew, she would be sent away, whisked into a servant’s arms and coddled until she stopped. When she grew old enough to be trained, her parents started punishing her whenever she cried. So she didn’t. Thriving in her household was a simple matter of doing exactly what her parents wanted. The rewards were always material, but Mai hadn’t known what else there was. Emotional gratification was abstract to her.

“What, are you doing?”

It was just her and Ty Lee; Azula had gone off to make sure that the general of the squadron with which they were traveling was well-informed about their destination.

It was a habit she had picked up as a child. Mai gravitated toward knives and stilettos for several reasons. One of them was that she was good at it. One of them was the sharp edge. When bored, when distracted, when feeling purposeless, she spun them in her hands. When boredom evaporated into numbness, she drew them across her skin. She had plenty of scars in places her parents wouldn’t think to look.

The pain, the biting sensation, the nigh-unbearable feeling that swept through her nerves as she split her skin, kept her grounded. It reminded her who she was. Every red droplet was a testimony that she was real. There was still something inside of her, something that existed without her parents’ permission. They had never told her heart to pump, her lungs to inflate, or her skin to bleed. But when she cut, she knew that she was real.

“What? Oh—nothing.” Disinterested, Mai was in the middle of wiping blood away from her upper
arm when she found herself caught up in a hug. She was so surprised she very nearly dropped the knife, but managed to cling on.

“Don’t do that. Please! It scares me when you do that.” When Ty drew back slightly, Mai was surprised to see that there were tears in her eyes. She hadn’t wanted to make Ty Lee cry. She hadn’t even wanted to hurt herself. The scars were a byproduct. She just wanted an anchor.

Ty Lee was there, still looking worried. Mai tilted her head and closed the gap between them, lips pressing to lips. Ty smelled good. Ty Lee’s body was warm against hers. She was an anchor. Surely that intimacy, the pleasant warmth in her stomach, was as good at affirming reality as pain…

I want to need you.

Mai imagined her mother’s voice clearly in her head. What are you doing? You’re supposed to marry a nobleman! Don’t go around kissing girls! Is that how I raised you?

Though Ty Lee was there, she felt lighter and lighter, as if she was becoming insubstantial. Mai’s skin was tingling. The warmth was gone. She drew back, the feeling of kissing already having left her lips. She met Ty Lee’s watery gaze.

“Please don’t do that,” Ty Lee said again, a wobbly smile crossing her face.

Mai forced her lips to curve upward. Don’t smile without your teeth. “Okay.”

She shifted her grasp on the knife from the handle to the blade, feeling it dig into her palm as she leaned in for another kiss.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Prove it.

It started, as so many other things started, with a taunt.

Pushing Mai was Azula’s forte, a game that obeyed neither rules nor logic and had no definitive outcome. Azula liked seeing how much Mai would take. Usually, the stoic girl would only acknowledge insults with a shrug. Sometimes she ignored them altogether. And sometimes, Mai wouldn’t take it any longer. She would stand up to Azula.

Those were the times Azula liked most. When Mai stood up, after all, it meant that Azula could crush her down.

“You’re such a coward. Look at you.” Azula laughed while she said it, like it was a joke, like she didn’t mean each of the deadly words falling from her lips.

“Mmm.” Mai didn’t really respond. She kept staring out the window, as if trying to keep her thoughts fixed elsewhere.

“You wouldn’t stand up to anyone. You always take the easiest road out.”

“Please stop, Azula,” Ty Lee murmured, resting one hand on the princess’s shoulder, though she was looking at Mai. As usual, Azula paid no attention.

“You can’t even tell me to stop yourself.”

Mai turned away from the window, her eyebrows furrowing. The show of emotion was more than she usually displayed, and just that simple victory sent a rush through Azula.

“I can stand up for myself,” Mai said, her voice level and even, no matter what her face said about her emotions.

“Oh?” Azula’s painted lips curled into a dangerous smile, her eyes gleaming. “Prove it.”

The words, it seemed, triggered something in Mai. Her face was no longer perfectly controlled, but contorted into a mask of anger. She stepped forward, bridging the gap between herself and Azula so quickly that the princess barely had time to react. Mai fixed clawlike hands on Azula’s shoulders, spinning her and pinning her against the wall.

It hurt. Azula’s head met the stone. She didn’t cry out, but her eyes narrowed. This game wasn’t as amusing, and she would have to teach Mai a lesson for acting out—

Mai’s mouth met Azula’s, not gentle, but feverish, biting down on the princess’s lips until she drew blood. The taste filled Azula’s mouth with a familiar metallic tang. She had drawn her own blood before, but nobody else had ever dared touch her this way, except—

Mai wasn’t done. Her fingers were reaching under Azula’s armor, dancing across her upper torso,
and then her other hand slipped under the waistband of Azula’s pants, and then—

It wasn’t a game any longer.

It was only Mai, Azula knew. That was what all of her physical senses were telling her. It was only Mai, and she could push her away at any moment, burn her, punish her, make her regret she had ever thought of this…

But the logic didn’t help, because this did not feel like Mai. This felt distinctly like someone else, someone who came and took whatever he wanted from Azula, who touched her however he liked and never bothered with gentleness. And instinctually, despite her own will, Azula felt her eyes going glassy, her mind disconnecting from the present, and her body going limp.

“Mai, stop it!”

Ty Lee broke them apart.

Maybe she had seen the look on Azula’s face. Maybe she had simply known that there would surely be repercussions. And now the princess was coming back to herself.

Mai didn’t meet her eyes. She was staring vacantly to one side, her lips dripping blood, as if she couldn’t quite believe what she had just done.

“Don’t ever do that again.” Azula advanced on Mai, igniting a blue flame in her right hand, her golden eyes gleaming dangerously. “You’re going to be sorry.”

And Mai was.

And yet, when the time came, she would stand up to Azula again.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

I'm cruel.

I am a princess.

Was it the sensations themselves she enjoyed, or the guilt that accompanied them? Did she enjoy the act or the rebellion inherent in it? Was it pleasurable when they did as she ordered, or was being the one who was ordering the true pleasure?

Secretly, she could have anybody she wanted. She chose them because they would keep her secrets. They were by her side. They were loyal.

Publicly, with her father’s hand on her shoulder and his touch coloring her every action, she could have nobody. She was untouchable, and not only because of her status. It wasn’t her status that made Ozai take her to bed, strip the clothes from her, and do as he liked.

Was it her status that made them kneel down, do as she asked? What made Ty Lee suck and lick, her tongue exploring the skin where Azula’s legs met? What made Mai’s hands and lips ravish her breasts? Was it Azula’s title, or the threat of flame from her fingertips, or was it her? Did they enjoy it?

Was it fear or love?

It didn’t really matter in the end, as Azula’s spine tingled and her hands tightened in her girls’ hair and waves of pleasure came crashing down around her.

It didn’t matter afterwards, when she sent them away, her tone harsh and her body closed off, not hers, not theirs. Azula felt no afterglow. She lay alone and felt the shadows creeping closer, imagining someone else in bed with her, and her fingers unconsciously traced the places where his hands would latch.

What would Ozai say if he knew about these dalliances? What would he do if he knew that his hands were not the only ones to traverse the planes of Azula’s form? Would he punish her or punish them? Both, Azula decided.

At home, at the palace of the Fire Nation, she resisted and resisted, knowing that the dangers were greater, knowing that her father’s ears and eyes were everywhere. But when frustrations piled up, she took the gamble and allowed herself to lie back on silken sheets, her body supported by pillows as Mai and Ty Lee did as she liked.

It was physical, she told herself easily, not emotional. The guilt was natural, but unnecessary. She was loyal to her father. They were only a diversion, something to keep her entertained.

She kept the secret anyway, because Ozai wouldn’t understand.

He summoned her at night, before she had the chance to bathe, and she wondered whether he noticed the faint signs of her friends—the slightest of smells, a long hair, darker than her own,
caught in her robe…

It didn’t really matter in the end. He used her. She used them. He owned her. She owned them. It was all reactionary.

He was cruel.

_I am cruel._
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Always wondered what this'd be like.

She let them stay the night with her once, just once. Once was more than enough.

Azula remembered when they had been children, when Mai and Ty Lee had spent the night, when all three had fallen asleep holding each other’s hands. Back then, the greatest pain Azula had known was accidentally burning herself. Back then, she hadn’t needed to hold herself together with lies and ambition.

She had been innocent.

In the night, in the wake of sex, it hadn’t seemed a foolish idea. They were already there, they were already tired, and Azula didn’t want to bother with kicking them out. They drifted off to sleep, Ty Lee first, then Mai, and Azula in the center wrapped an arm around each of them and felt their warmth. It kept her comfortable, happy, as she drifted off to sleep.

She hadn’t made the connection then that being held in her friends’ arms was reminiscent of being held in her mother’s.

In the morning, Azula was the first to awaken.

The sun spilled through her curtains, draped dazzling golden light across her desk and her drapes and onto the sheets, making Ty Lee’s skin shine and small bright lights dance in the shadows of Mai’s hair. It would have been beautiful. It could have been perfect.

But none of it was real.

They weren’t really even her friends.

Azula had burned her bridges.

Ty Lee was there only because Azula had left her no choice, because Azula had threatened her. Mai was there without needing the threat—she had known what would come and anticipated it. They were there out of fear, out of loyalty to their royal family.

They were lovers only in name, only because of the actions they took in the dark, skin against skin and lips on lips. There wasn’t any love. They were Azula’s pawns, her tools, to be directed and utilized as she willed. And in return, they feared her, doing as she ordered because the alternative was too deadly.

It was a lie.

Azula looked at them, Ty Lee at her right side, Mai on her left, and she wished for a very long moment that she could believe it. She wanted to believe that there was more between them, that their connection wasn’t simply tenuous loyalty and convenience. She wanted to believe that the only relationships that mattered in her life weren’t as hollow as the infinite conversations she held
with nobles. She wanted to feel the happiness that supposedly came with love, that came with seeing a lover in the morning, still fast asleep and peaceful.

She couldn’t.

It was foolish.

She wasn’t a child any longer, and she couldn’t hold on to childish dreams. Attachments led to pain. People would turn on her. She was safe only when she was alone. She was strong only when she severed her emotion and used people as she would Pai Sho tiles.

But logic couldn’t erase the longing from her mind.

She slipped out from between the two of them, stood at the end of the bed, and looked back. Ty Lee, perhaps noticing the absence of warmth, shifted in her sleep, rolling over, coming to a rest with her arms around Mai.

It looked better with just the two of them.

Azula left her room.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I'm broken.

It was evening. Ty Lee had gone out into the city to visit her family, the first time she would see them since leaving for the circus. Mai was spending time with the royal sibling she clearly preferred. The thought of them together, laughing, fingers and legs entwined, was more than enough to rouse Azula’s ire.

She sat alone in the dark and tried not to think about it. The servants were gone; Lo and Li had retired to their chambers, and it was just the fire princess alone with the shadows.

She bathed in water hot enough to scald and let her hair fan out a curtain on the surface. She pulled on her robe and extinguished the candles one by one.

She glanced at the bed but didn’t bother climbing in. Azula knew when she wouldn’t be able to sleep. She walked out onto her balcony and stared out at the lights of the city, tiny windows in distant houses illuminated by torches and candles. Somewhere out there was Ty Lee, probably experiencing a joyous reunion, embraced by all of her sisters, her parents looking on. Here in the palace were Mai and Zuko, having their own fun, all thoughts of others forgotten.

Azula remembered the years after Zuko’s banishment. She had been alone then, utterly alone. She had no friends and no companions. Ozai and his watchdogs, the twins, had been the only constants. And yet that hadn’t left her feeling like this, irritatingly hollow, left out, as if something important was missing.

Loneliness was a useless emotion. A stupid emotion. But she couldn’t suppress it. It was welling inside of her, filling her with a need for something, anything to hold on to.

Sleep would be the best idea, but her insomnia ensured that was not a possibility.

Alone in the darkness, Azula’s thoughts spiraled downward.

It was the foregone conclusion, and she reached it with relief. Her hands rummaged through her closet, searching for the sheath. She found it and smiled at it and opened it, surveying the knife. It was clean, all silver, though it had tasted her blood before.

Stroke by stroke, Azula smiled as she punished herself for weakness. Stroke by stroke, alone in the darkness, Azula’s breath caught and her hair hung over as blood beaded up along neat, straight incisions.

Engrossed as she was, she didn’t hear the door open, or the soft footsteps behind her.

“…Azula.”

The princess stiffened, knife still in one hand, the vicious rapture fading from her face.

“I thought you were with Zuko.”
Mai moved across the room without permission, seating herself beside Azula. Azula tensed, ready to lash out at any given moment.

“I was. I left.”

“Oh?”

Mai hesitated for a long moment, staring down at her hands. “He deserves better than me.”

Azula looked at Mai, the very faint light glimmering in her dark hair, the long slope of her eyes, her thin lips, and did not find her wanting.

You deserve better than him. “He deserves nothing.” You could have chosen me. Why didn’t you choose me? I’m better. I’m stronger.

The kiss, when Mai initiated it, was not romantic. It was desperate and vicious and angry. Mai pulled the princess close, her nails digging into Azula’s back, her teeth sucking and biting Azula’s neck. There would be marks; she was trying to leave marks.

So when you feel inferior, you come to me? The thought made Azula smirk and push back, and she remembered the knife still in her hand. I should be first.

Azula’s blood, still wet, still sticky, bound them together, and Azula’s fingers and the knife found the openings of Mai’s clothes. Azula’s robe was easy to slip off, and then it was only skin and blood, for Mai’s nails dug for purchase and her teeth tore skin, and the knife in Azula’s hand was eager and hungry and everywhere it drew Mai’s blood, the princess’s tongue followed it, and the two of them mingled pleasure and pain, hatred and anger, loneliness and inferiority.

It was not about the sex.

We’re—

—broken.
Azula traced her feet carelessly over ground where they had stepped together before. She lay alone in the indentations in her sheets and held her hands out to feel the phantoms lying on either side of her. She imagined them laughing, imagined them there beside her, tried to remember when they had been there.

When the memories didn’t resurface, when the pain stayed manageable, she took it further. She ordered her servants to braid her hair and pretended it was Ty’s hands moving along her scalp. She smashed Mai’s perfume in her washroom and smelled it, day after day after day, as if Mai’s spirit was lingering there, as if she had just left.

But she didn’t mourn them, and she came to realize that she didn’t miss them. No reminder she forced on herself made her regret leaving them in the bottom of the Fire Nation’s most heinous prison. No long day spent only in the company of her maidservants made her wish they were there beside her.

I’m better off now, you useless wretches.

At night, in the shadows, her hands furiously mimicked her friends’ movements along her body. She didn’t bother pretending it was Ty Lee’s tongue, and when she came, she threw her head back and stretched her lips into a gruesome smile. She didn’t need them.

It was strange.

They had been there for quite some time. Ty Lee’s laughter was a constant noise; Mai’s soft presence was always tangible. And now there was nothing but void, nothing but the sting of betrayal. They made stupid choices and they were going to pay for them. It didn’t bother Azula. She didn’t care that they were gone. She didn’t care. She didn’t care. She didn’t…

It was only the realization that she didn’t need them that brought Azula any emotion at all. She bent over, head grasped in her fingers, entirely alone and unbothered. Why didn’t she feel anything about them betraying her?

Had she seen it coming?

She moved her fingers between her legs again, trying to feel something, trying to feel the absence of something. She thought she had enjoyed them. She thought she had used them for things like this.

I thought I needed this.

Azula rose out of the shadows and went to Ozai of her own volition, her only garb the robe hung loosely around her shoulders. She didn’t mind the servants’ stares. Let them think what they wanted. She had already started losing things.
“Azula?” Ozai was alone in his chambers, as usual, and Azula didn’t bother with words before she descended on her father, blood pounding through her veins, her mind overflowing with emotions she could not identify.

Ozai was not gentle, as she had not expected him to be. With every touch, he burned away the memories of the traitors.

Azula was happy.
Azula didn’t want it.

The taste sat heavy and harsh on her tongue, making her throat burn, like she was swallowing fire. No—that wasn’t an adequate comparison. She didn’t mind breathing fire. But she minded this, the taste, the scent, the way it sat in her stomach and ran through her veins.

She didn’t want it, but she couldn’t say no.

The scent was overpowering. Glass after glass, it reminded her of the stench on her father’s breath as he leaned over her, vicious, lustful. She had smelled it on his skin and on his clothes for years. He wasn’t always drunk, but when he was…

Ozai had a heavy hand.

“You look so beautiful with your cheeks flushed,” he said, his golden eyes devouring her face before he leaned in to kiss her, leaned in to disrobe her. He paused in the midst to pour another glass. Azula couldn’t focus on the stream of amber liquid. She didn’t want to drink it. But Ozai wanted her to, and so she choked it down, and smiled for him as he ravished her.

The hallways were long and winding and her head was spinning. She had lost count of the glasses. Her father had fallen asleep with his arms around her, but she couldn’t stay. She felt as if the walls were closing in around her. Alcohol numbed her mind, made thinking slower and clumsier, but it threw all of her fears into sharp relief.

She staggered, somehow, to her room, nearly falling down one flight of stairs. It took several attempts to open her door.

They were waiting there, in her room. Ty Lee had been asleep, flopped over into Mai’s lap, but her eyelids opened nearly as soon as Azula entered.

“Azula…?”

It was immediately apparent that something was not right with her. Ty Lee jumped up, Mai rising slowly after her.

“I don’t—feel—” Azula managed, half-collapsing onto the nearest chair. Ty was there in an instant, her hands warm and steady on the princess’s shoulders. At any other time, Azula would have shoved her away, insisted that she did not need help, but the feeling was soothing. She liked being held.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, after a long pause. Mai and Ty Lee helped her to her feet, and somehow they managed to half-drag her through the rooms toward her washroom.

She vomited into a basin, Mai carefully holding her hair out of the way, Ty Lee rubbing gentle
circles on her back. Azula hated it. It was humiliating. It was disgraceful. She never wanted to feel like this, out of control of her own body, as if it was turning on her. She never wanted her eyes to swim and her throat to burn and her feet unable to take steps in the correct direction.

She wanted to make her father happy, but she didn’t want to do this to herself in the process.

Tears mixed with bile streaming down her face. They washed down her face and the cloth came away steaming; heat was emanating from every part of her skin. The emotion, usually carefully suppressed, was bursting forth, and her body was not enough to contain it.

“I hate him,” she snarled, teeth digging into her lips. “I hate this.”

Mai and Ty Lee exchanged glances, the latter’s own face looking tearful, and then they pulled Azula into her bed, lying on either side to keep her safe as the nightmares chased her down.

In the morning, Azula had a horrific headache and no recollection of what she had said.

The others didn’t bring it up.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The impulse came upon Azula suddenly, viciously, with such intensity that she could not brace herself against it.

It was a culmination of a series of troublesome events, starting with Zuko’s taking a stand against their father and running off to join the Avatar. Azula had first heard the news when Ozai summoned her, and before he had even spoken, she had known that she would leave that meeting with more bruises than she entered it. Ozai had never hurt her like that before, never punished her like that before. He held her down and hit her across the face; he held her throat until the world spun; he traced superheated fingers down her skin in an imitation of tenderness until her nerves caught up and she screamed.

Something had shifted inside of her, falling into the empty space Zuko had used to occupy. Azula visited her brother’s chambers and wanted to scream, to throw things, to burn and break all the furniture in sight, but she couldn’t. She wasn’t a child any longer. She couldn’t throw temper tantrums. She couldn’t let anyone see the cracks that were starting to spread across her surface.

She didn’t know whether it was in her head or not, but she started to see the guards whispering. Her servants stopped conversations abruptly when she entered the room. Her father’s generals eyed her with mistrust where previously there had been admiration.

They could tell she was slipping.

And it came over her like it hadn’t in years, the desire so strong, so overwhelmingly strong, to hurt something, to destroy something. It overpowered her. It took control of every sense and every thought. It was a need. She was erupting, she was breaking apart, and she had to get rid of all the emotion. She needed something, anything, to relieve the pain.

It had used to be herself, a knife drawn across skin in the dark. But Azula didn’t want that today. She wasn’t going to suffer in silence. She had hurt enough. And besides, she had a perfectly willing recipient, one who wouldn’t share her secrets.

Mai was off skulking, spending infinite scads of time alone, as had been her custom ever since Zuko’s betrayal. She wasn’t the one Azula wanted anyway.

Ty Lee came when she was called, her grey eyes saying nothing of whether she suspected Azula’s intentions, whether she noticed the manic hints in the princess’s smile.

Azula closed the door behind them. The candles all burned blue, feeling the influence of her overwhelming anger, the heat simmering just beneath the surface of her skin. The open windows were no respite from the heat, but Azula didn’t sweat.

Ty Lee was in the process of taking off her shirt when Azula descended, not dissimilarly to her father. Her fingers caught Ty’s clothes on fire, burning them away, the heat close enough to the
skin to be painful. Ty let out a squeak before keeping her lips closed. Perhaps she guessed something of Azula’s mood.

Azula pinned Ty down, wasting no time on gentleness, and brought her mouth down to the acrobat’s shoulder, sucking and licking where neck met shoulder. Just as Ty Lee started making small, pleasurable noises, Azula sunk her teeth in. She ignored the cry of pain. She dug harder and harder, the coppery taste of blood filling her mouth. She could rip it away, rip open Ty’s neck, make her bleed out here and now, take her apart.

She withdrew. Ty Lee was shaking, her hands grabbing fistfuls of the sheets, her mouth making small whimpers. And abruptly, Azula found the noises intolerable.

It didn’t take very much pressure on Ty’s throat for her eyes to bulge, her mouth wide, desperately searching for air. She gazed up at Azula, imploring, desperate for relief, but there was none to be found. Azula stared down and watched the breath drain away from Ty Lee little by little until her eyelids flickered closed.

She could keep holding on, hold on until Ty stopped breathing forever. But Azula didn’t.

The overpowering desire to hurt something was still there. This had changed nothing, helped nothing. Ty Lee was useless. Without the option of hurting someone else, Azula drew on her robe. She would go to her father and settle for the next best thing. If she couldn’t hurt herself, he would hurt her.

Ty Lee awoke alone in Azula’s bed, the curtains flapping in the breeze.
Chapter Summary

I'm awake and you're breathing.

Azula was a light, light sleeper. She was almost always the first of the three to wake in the morning, stirring at the faintest signs of the sun over the horizon. She’d awake at the slightest movement, the slightest sound. It took all of Ty Lee’s and Mai’s care to move silently through the room, and always Azula would still be roused, her golden eyes opening to gleam catlike in the shadows.

But tonight it wasn’t so.

Mai found herself awake, suddenly, in the darkness. Azula’s room was silent but for the faint sound of wind through the open windows. The princess was in the middle, as always, but on her far side Ty Lee was sitting up. The two shared a glance, afraid to speak lest their words rouse the sleeping dragon.

It seemed almost indecent, but Mai let her eyes drift over Azula’s sleeping form, and it occurred to her that she had never actually seen Azula so deeply asleep before. But there she was, curled into an impossibly tiny ball on one side, her eyebrows furrowed as if she was concentrating…or, more likely, as if she was having a nightmare.

In what felt like an eternity, Mai slipped slowly out from under the sheets, letting her feet hit the floor without a sound. She started across the room, waiting for Azula to wake at any second. On the far side of the bed, Ty Lee was also standing.

“I’m sorry.”

Both of them froze, not daring to move, until the silence stretched out without another word. Azula was still fast asleep, her lips still moving, though no sound came out.

Once again Mai had the sense of seeing something indecent, something she never should have seen, and that Azula certainly never would have wanted her to see. It didn’t help that the words that slipped from the princess’s lips were ones that she almost never said while conscious.

Out on the balcony, overlooking the shadowy city, Mai and Ty Lee felt comfortable speaking in very hushed tones.

“What do you think she dreams about?” Ty whispered. The moon was reflected in her wide eyes, making them shine silver.

“Nothing happy.” Mai had only ever heard Azula apologize to one person, and that was her father. Seeing the marks Ozai left on Azula, and having at least some hint of the emotional trauma he inflicted on her, made Mai glad that she didn’t know what Azula’s nightmares contained.

A long silence. The city below seemed miles away; all other life seemed miles away. It was just them and the sleeping girl just beyond.
“…Do you remember when we found out?” Ty Lee again, her lips quivering. Mai didn’t need to ask what she was talking about.

“Yeah.” Not that they had been close enough to see much. It was the sounds that echoed through Mai’s memories, those grunts and the dull, repetitive thuds of skin and bone against a hard surface, and the quieter sounds of pain.

Just the remembering made bile rise in Mai’s throat.

“Do you think we did the right thing?”

Mai laughed hollowly before remembering the sleeping Azula, whereupon she bit her lips together.

“No. There was no right thing. Nothing about this is right. He’s fucked up, and she’s fucked up, and we’re fucked up.”

“But should we have told someone?” There was a pleading desperation in Ty’s voice. Her eyes were glistening with tears. Mai sighed inwardly.

“Who could we have told?”

The question hung over them, as it had for years, so many years of keeping a secret that poisoned everything it touched. And there was no answer, so there was just silence between them, no resolution. And at last the air became too cold, and they went back to the side of their princess.

She was awake, her golden eyes gleaming in the dark, and they joined her mutely again.
Ty Lee was open and free in her affection. She liked people, almost all people, upon first glance. She would smile and introduce herself, her enthusiasm radiating outward, a palpable force—what she would call her aura. And everybody she met, she found herself bound to. She was empathic, feeling the pain and happiness of strangers as if it was her own.

Being in close proximity with Azula, knowing what she did, was exceedingly difficult. Every bruise she saw on the princess’s skin made Ty Lee ache. She cried for Azula more times than she could count, even as Azula looked on with dispassionate contempt. Sometimes Ty Lee suspected that she felt Azula’s pain more acutely than Azula herself did, but she dismissed such thoughts as selfish, for she was nobody to tell Azula how to suffer.

Ty Lee loved Azula. She truly, genuinely loved her.

That made it harder still, because Ty Lee saw the writing on the wall long before either of the others did. No matter how naïve others judged her as being, she was perceptive.

“I thought Mai was coming over too,” the nine-year-old Ty Lee said, glancing around Azula’s room as if expecting Mai to jump out.

“She got waylaid by Zuzu.” Azula crossed her arms, spitting her brother’s mocking nickname.

“‘It’s just you and I,’” the fourteen-year-old Azula purred, her hungry fingers working at the clasps of Ty Lee’s shirt. “Mai’d rather spend her time with Zuko, but we’ll have more fun without her anyway...”

When she heard that Zuko had betrayed the nation to join the Avatar, Ty Lee felt as if ice had flooded her stomach—not because she feared for her country, but because she envisioned, even then, what was coming. She spent the days keeping her smile intact, trying not to alert either of them to her fear even as it grew inside of her, a monster threatening to swallow her alive.

She thought about talking to Mai, pleading with her, but knew that her words would have no effect. Mai and Ty Lee’s allegiances were fundamentally different. The same love that Ty Lee held for the princess was reflected in Mai’s love for the prince.

They wouldn’t all come out of it together. Each passing day Ty waited for it all to break apart, for the shadowy bonds that had held them through the past months to dissipate.

It happened in a fiery crater, the blue sky above them and an infamous prison below them.

When Mai raised her knife, her steely eyes glinting as she prepared herself for a fight she surely knew she couldn’t win, Ty Lee’s mind went into overdrive. Her pupils dilated, her breathing quickened, and she wanted to scream out. This couldn’t happen. It couldn’t be happening. Not
there, not then. She had seen it coming, but she wasn’t prepared.

Then Azula raised her fingers, preparing to bend the lightning they had seen her manipulate before *(oh spirits she had killed like that and she was going to do it again she was going to kill Mai and it was happening too fast)* and everything shifted into black and white.

Azula kills Mai. One friend dead.

She intervened. No friends dead.

Two friends alive. One friend dead.

When time was of the utmost urgency, Ty Lee felt almost as if her body was moving of its own accord. She felt her knuckles dig into the proper pressure points as she had done a thousand times before, but never quite with this significance, never quite with this danger.

Azula fell.

As the guards dragged her and Mai away, Ty Lee wanted to reach out, wanted to scream. She hadn’t meant to betray Azula. She hadn’t meant for any of this to happen. She couldn’t stand the look in the princess’s eye, something different from anything Ty Lee had seen before. She didn’t want to leave Azula alone again.

But the instant sound started leaving her lips, a cold iron hand clamped over her mouth and nose. She couldn’t breathe. She remembered the feeling, so similar, of Azula’s hands around her neck.

*I—love—*
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

I want to break you.

Even Ty Lee could not maintain a smile upon seeing Azula’s body. She wanted to keep smiling for the princess, maintain her role of cheer and optimism, but it was impossible.

It looked as if Azula had been set upon by a beast. Cuts streaked her shoulders, rivulets of blood disturbing the princess’s smooth, pale skin. Bruises marred all of her, coloring her stomach and her chest and her thighs dark greens and browns and purples. But perhaps most horrific of all, the wound that kept drawing Ty’s gaze, was the burn disfiguring Azula’s left breast. The vicious, open lesion bore the distinctive shape of a handprint, inevitably imprinting in Ty Lee’s mind the image of a hand, searing hot, placed there and squeezing…

“Oh, Azula…” Ty Lee whispered. She stepped forward, at once wanting to take Azula into her arms and fearing the reaction.

“He made me promise never to lie to him again,” Azula said, a mocking smile curving those beautiful lips. “I’m going to kill Zuko, Ty. I’m going to hunt him down and hurt him until he screams. I’m going to kill his friends and save him for last. And maybe just before I rip him open, I’ll tell him about this. He betrayed me. He did this to me.” After a brief pause, Azula studied her fingernails and added, almost as an afterthought, “Maybe I deserved it.”

Ty Lee couldn’t take it. How could Azula say these things, act as if this was normal, act as if any of this was her fault? The monster was the one who scarred his children, who pitted them against each other, not the prince or princess.

“Doesn’t it hurt, Azula?” she asked, tears gathering on her eyelashes. She held out her arms in a futile gesture, wanting to comfort but not close enough.

Her words (stupid in hindsight) seemed to awaken fervor in the princess. Azula’s head snapped up, animalistic, her teeth bared, her eyes gleaming with an insane light. And before Ty Lee could take it back, before she could even react, Azula was striding forward, and then her arm connected with Ty’s chest, and then Ty’s head slammed back against the wall and stars were bursting in front of her vision.

“Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it hurt?” Azula mocked. She grabbed Ty Lee’s head again and rammed it back against the wall. This time Ty Lee cried out, but the noise only seemed to incense the princess. “Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it hurt?” Azula seemed to be screaming and laughing and roaring all at once, her voice hysterical and far, far too loud. There was no time to think, just pain and those golden eyes just a few inches away.

Azula’s knee connected with Ty Lee’s stomach, forcing her to double over, and then Azula was forcing one hand under the waistband of Ty’s pants and her fingers were inside of the acrobat, pushing in and out too hard and too quickly, and the tears were spilling out of the corners of Ty Lee’s eyes and running down her cheeks.
“Doesn’t it hurt?” Azula crooned, her fingers still busy, her free hand brushing away Ty’s tears and then digging her nails in, slowly, to her cheek. Red flowers blossomed where the princess’s poisonous touch went, but Ty Lee had no time to linger on that pain, because in between her thighs Azula’s fingers were growing hotter and hotter and—

“Azula! Please! You’re burning me! Azula! It—it really hurts!” And the look on Azula’s face was no longer crazed. Her eyes were narrow and her mouth was set, a look of cold calculation as her fingers heated and heated and burned away Ty Lee a little bit at a time and—

“Stop it, Azula!”

Neither of them had heard the door open, or maybe she had been there all along, in the shadows, but Mai was suddenly there, pulling the princess off of Ty Lee, and suddenly the pain was much lessened. Ty doubled over, panting, the lingering sensation of burning still caught between her thighs. Azula wrenched herself free from Mai’s grasp, glaring daggers.

“Save yourself for Zuko,” Mai said, somehow managing to maintain her composure. “Ty’s on your side. Just hold it off. Just keep your anger fixed on him.”

A few more agonizing seconds passed, Ty fearing that any second Azula would jump forward to attack Mai instead, but at long last the princess merely laughed.

“I hope you cry when I kill him,” Azula said, and then she disappeared into the washroom and closed the door behind her.

“Are you okay?” Mai placed her hands on Ty’s shoulders. The acrobat nodded mutely. Her eyes were fixed on the door, behind which lay a dragon.

There was nothing but silence.

Ty Lee could feel it underneath her skin: the beginning of an end.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Wish I didn't love you.

There was something wrong with her.

By rights, she should have been happy. By rights, everything was going exactly as it should have been. The war was over. She was engaged to the Fire Lord. Peace reigned. She no longer had to go day by day obeying orders that she didn’t agree with.

But Mai wasn’t happy, not even close.

She smiled for Zuko and for the people, a desperate attempt to convince them that there was something inside of her, that she wasn’t the cold, unfeeling girl most people assumed she was. She tried to convince herself that her depression was temporary, that it would pass. It never worked; Mai always had been far too honest with herself.

The only person with whom she would have felt comfortable discussing such things was across the ocean, in the reaches of the Earth Kingdom. Mai didn’t want to write letters, scared that they would be intercepted, for their contents would border on traitorous.

She had missed Zuko, and their coupling, always late after his meetings, always in the dim shadows of his room, was wonderful, but there was something missing. The care and gentleness with which he touched her, even with which he entered her, was a stark contrast to what she was used to. Somehow his kisses, even when they were burning hot, seemed chaste—he never left permanent marks on her skin. He’d ask after her long-healed burns, and she’d shrug them off as accidents. How was she to say that his sister had been there first, marking her territory, preemptively stealing Mai away from Zuko?

And so, even as he moved inside of her, even as pleasure overcame her, part of Mai longed for something far removed. She longed for ferocious talons that dug into her skin and red lips that always smirked when they met her own. She longed for the overwhelming pleasure that they dragged out of her, Ty Lee’s tongue between her legs, Azula’s mouth on hers, so counter to everything her parents had taught her, so wrong, so lovely.

She missed the games.

And she hated herself for missing it. Wasn’t this what she wanted? She had bided her time under Azula, waiting and hoping to be reunited with Zuko. She had done what the princess ordered because it was easiest, and because nothing good would come of disobedience. Why wasn’t she happy?

The fantasies seemed to take on a life of their own, until she found herself stealing away, closing her eyes, and moving her fingers between her legs. She went to bed next to Zuko, dreamed hot dreams about his sister, and woke up with sweat coating her skin.

Every mention of the name, every slight reminder, was difficult. She hated Azula. She hated
Azula. She hated everything the princess had done. She loved peace. She had to love peace. She was the future Fire Lady, after all.

But she didn’t.

She was living out a lie, putting on a useless smile to please a host of people she didn’t care about. And with each passing day, she saw Zuko grow more and more agitated at her declining mood. It was truly pathetic—she couldn’t even protect the person she cared about from her all-consuming obsession. She couldn’t stop it, couldn’t slow it down. It was eating her alive.

The day when Mai caught herself cutting open her palm with one of her many stilettos was the day she made the fateful decision.

The guards and doctors bowed, murmuring “Lady Mai,” and led the way to Azula’s cell.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

I pity you.

Chapter Notes

Warning for major character death.

Why did it have to happen like this?

Ty Lee was crying silently, the tears pouring from her eyes and down her cheeks mimicking the rain falling all around them. Mai stood still, feeling her eyes water, not letting the tears fall. By her side, Zuko had lowered his head, and she could tell that he was crying too. She would be the strong one, she supposed. She would stand there, cold, and wish that she could cry, but to no avail.

The fire's heat was enough to warm them, but Mai had chills anyway. She hoped, in some abstract way, that she would catch a cold. Illness seemed a friendly beckoning, stretching out its welcoming arms. Death wouldn't hurt, not like this did.

She'd never even gotten the chance to speak to her in the end. The doctors hadn't let her, insisting it would be too much of a strain on her mind. Would it, Mai wondered? Keeping her away hadn't done anything. She wanted to go back and rub that in their faces, scream it at them. They had kept Azula alone to the end. She had died surrounded by pale walls and metal bars instead of by the few people who still cared about her. Mai didn't like to think it, but in all likelihood Azula had died believing that none of them cared at all.

The doctors all insisted it had been sudden, that she had been wasting away but that none of them expected it so soon. They said that she gave up, which made Mai want to grab them and shake them. Azula didn't give up. She had never given up. She had fought through depths of darkness that none of them could imagine.

She was wearing a golden and red dress that somehow managed to hide how thin she was. Mai still imagined she could see every rib against the cloth. The undertaker had painted her face, making its contours less gaunt and the skin less sallow. Mai didn't think it really looked like Azula at all. The man had colored her lips a paler, more natural pink. They needed their red, the spot of color that shone out against the rest of her face. Her hair was down, a gentle halo. She looked nothing like she had in life. The only fire in her was that embroidered on the silk of her dress.

It felt sacreligious when they put her body onto the pyre. Seeing Azula surrounded by orange felt wrong; there should have been blue, something, anything...

Mai watched the hair and cloth catch fire, watched the features slowly disfigure, with a cold detachment. On her left, Ty Lee was sobbing into her sleeve, unable to bear looking any longer. On her right, Zuko's hand was clenching hers so hard that she felt he would stop her circulation.
She almost wanted to imagine that this was all a joke, that Azula would rise from the ashes of her own pyre and smirk at them all, as if it had just been an elaborate prank, as if she was fine really, as if death wasn't the goal she had sought after her incarceration.

Unbidden, Mai remembered the princess as she had been, all fire and passion, her golden eyes gleaming and her black hair tied neatly up, deadly and ingenious ideas forming inside her mind. She remembered touches and kisses and the friendship the princess had given her so many years ago, before all of this had happened, before it had all gone wrong.

Mai's control failed her then, and tears she had been holding back began the slow descent down her cheeks. She bit her lip, holding back sound, and watched her princess burn.

How could Azula be here, nothing more than a sack of meat, and Ozai still draw breath, cognizant of his role in her demise?

Mai felt the comforting edge of a stiletto in her sleeve and ran her finger along the blade. She'd take care of him, she promised, watching someone she loved burn. Oh, she'd take good care of him, Azula's name on her lips and vengeance in her heart, and she would pretend that this made the fact that she had done nothing to stop Azula's death acceptable.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

This isn't about you at all.

It was with more trepidation and anger than she had ever carried inside of her before that Mai set out from the palace without telling Zuko, without telling anyone. The guards had been reluctant to bring her, at first, especially since her stomach had been growing rounder lately and people seemed to think that so much as a breath of city air would kill the child. But the mere hint of a flashing knife was enough to remind them that she was their Fire Lady, and then there was no more trouble.

It was what Azula would have done, Mai thought, but thinking of it brought her neither pleasure nor shame. In the month since the funeral, Azula had occupied an odd space in her mind, no longer a symbol of hatred or a problem to be solved.

Death made everything simpler.

It had been an unusually rainy summer, and as the guards took her to the prison, rain dampened the silken walls of the palanquin. Mai ran her fingers down the cloth to dissipate the condensation, anything to keep her mind off the man she was about to see.

She would have taken out her knife and applied it liberally to her skin, but when she had discovered she was pregnant she had sworn off self-inflicted pain for the time being.

They arrived. The guards helped her off the palanquin, but she refused to accept their help as she climbed the stairs of the prison. The warden, clearly surprised to see the Fire Lady on his doorstep, beckoned her to follow him.

Ozai’s cell was dim, windowless, and barren, but somehow it infuriated Mai to see that he still had a mattress, still had a tray of food. He was here, drawing breath, while his daughter’s lungs had turned to ash and been blown away in the wind.

“Well, if it isn’t the Fire Lady herself. To what do I owe the honor?”

His voice had always been remarkable, simultaneously silken and powerful, so like his daughter’s. Even here, brought low, he spoke with force. Mai had heard the tone before, and the things she knew about this man made her want to shiver. She did not, because she thought of Azula, and the anger overcame her repulsion.

“Your daughter is dead.” She was a master of controlling herself, even more than Azula had been, and her voice showed nothing of the vicious rage in Mai’s head.

Ozai sighed, golden eyes heavy-lidded in an expression of boredom. Again, the resemblance was uncanny. “It’s been over a month. I’m in prison, not in exile. I hear things.”

“You don’t seem to care.”

He blinked, slowly, hawklike. “I grieve on my own terms.” And then he had the nerve to smile, something cocky and arrogant that made Mai want to reach for her knife and vivisect him, make
him scream for mercy, castrate him and bleed him out.

She settled for biting down on the inside of her lip. She would not show him what she felt. It would be akin to losing, and for Azula’s sake she would not lose. “I know what you did to her.”

“Fascinating, yet vague.”

“How could you do it? You must have seen what it did to her. She did everything you asked, and you still hurt her. She killed for you, and you couldn’t keep your hands off? Couldn’t sate your lust on other concubines? Why did it have to be her?” Mai spoke in monotone, for fear that the slightest inflection would set rage loose into her voice.

Ozai’s eyes flicked away and then back to her face. “Azula was special, and that’s really all I have to say on that. What does it matter? She’s dead. You can extract all the things you want from me and she’ll still be dead. You’re wasting your time.”

Mai unsheathed her penultimate weapon, determined to wipe the smirk from his face, determined to make him feel something. “You thought you owned her, body and soul, but she was always rebelling against you. She hated you. She promised you she only belonged to you, but that was just the lie you wanted to hear. All that time and you never suspected, did you? All that time you were fucking Azula, you couldn’t be bothered to notice that she was bedding us too.”

It worked. Ozai’s lips parted, his eyes narrowing as he looked up at her. Several long seconds passed, Mai standing over him, waiting for a retort.

At last Ozai spoke, and his voice was laced with poison. “…Is that so? My own daughter, philandering with other girls? I suppose she was more of a whore than I thought. I should have punished her worse. It’s good that she’s dead.”

A red film came over Mai’s vision, anger coming up through her throat and coating her mouth with its stickiness. She drew a knife from the inside of her sleeve where it had been strapped. The bars meant nothing; she could throw with deadly precision, pin him there and aim for his vitals one by one.

“You’re going to kill me? A little revenge, is this? Go ahead. It isn’t as if I have much to look forward to anyway.” His voice was silky, laughing, and that snapped Mai from her rage. Her anger became calm again, a boiling lake with an icy crust. She looked down at him. Had he intended for her to kill him? Had he made his comments with the intent of goading her?

She had forgotten that this man was a serpent who had passed his tongue to his daughter.

Mai’s grip on the blade loosened and she turned. It would be crueler to let him live out his life in these four walls. She would add more guards, ensure that he never saw the light of day again, forbid him visitors. She hoped Azula would visit his fevered mind the way he had visited hers.

“Rot,” she said calmly, and then she left the place.

On the long trip back to the palace, Mai let herself cry, though anger had gone and these tears were simply for catharsis. She sent a prayer to the Spirit World, wondering if Azula could hear it.

Sorry. I didn’t do it after all.
I hate you.


Never before had she felt like this. Never before had her feelings been so all-consuming. Never before had she been faced with darkness so bleak that finding a light seemed impossible. She was supposed to be the one who could see the good in everything. She was supposed to be happy even when others were struggling. It was the role she had imposed on herself.

And just like that, like turning on a switch, it was gone.

Ty Lee had heard the word *depression* before, of course. The doctors had used it time and time again in all the letters they wrote her in response to her endless inquiries about Azula’s condition. The princess had been *depressed*, and now she was dead, and now Ty Lee was *depressed*.

(Did that mean she’d soon be dead?)

She had never understood what it could be like to go through life without the will to live, because everything gave Ty the will to live. She could help people, and she could fulfill her dreams, and even just the simple beauty of the sky had seemed reason enough to get up each morning. It was part of why Azula’s condition had caused her such anxiety—she couldn’t understand.

Now, though…

Six months since the funeral. Six stupid months, stuck on an island with people who still were wary of trusting her. And Ty Lee found that she hated all of it, from her wooden house to the dark green uniform to her fellow Kyoshi Warriors. It was all pointless. Why did the island even need a gang of warriors? The war was over. They just did their drills and trained, day after day, for threats that probably wouldn’t ever come.

(Six months without Azula.)

Ty Lee hated them. She had accepted the girls as her family, left her home for them, longed to be a part of something that could utilize her talents for good. But they didn’t accept her. They still cut conversations off abruptly when she came around corners. They’d still glance at her and whisper when she passed them on the roads.

She’d only gone to train with them a handful of times since her return. After that she hadn’t been able to stomach the thought. They looked at her as if she was a time bomb. And she didn’t have to be as good of a reader of people as Azula to guess what they were thinking.

*Whose side is she really on?*

Ty Lee spent endless, listless hours in bed, trying not to think, which was, of course, a futile attempt. She didn’t know what to do with these emotions. Even after the Boiling Rock, even when she and Mai had been locked up, she hadn’t felt like this. Then she’d been physically caged, but
now she felt like her mind had been shut away. The happiness was surely somewhere still inside her head, but she couldn’t find it, for the first time in her life.

(Surely Azula was still out there, and this was just a dream…)

She reached a point where leaving the house became useless. Now people stared even more because of her disheveled appearance, and she didn’t have the strength to see them look at her like that. She already didn’t belong. She knew that. Did they have to rub it in?

Suki came by at least twice a week, hovering by the door and windows. Ty Lee never answered her knocks. She knew Suki would be more sympathetic than the others, and somehow that seemed more repugnant than stares and judgment.

Ty Lee slept, just slept. And sleeping became an addiction, because in her dreams all three of them were together again, and Azula was there, and Azula was smiling.

After she awoke from the first dream, she realized why she felt the way she did. How could she allow herself happiness when it had been denied Azula forever? How could she ever smile again when she knew Azula’s lips were frozen?

The world was darker.

One morning she dragged herself out of bed and propped herself up to walk on her hands, but her arms lacked the strength to hold her up. She crashed down into a heap on the wooden floor and couldn’t even be bothered to get back under the sheets.

It hadn’t really hurt, but soon Ty Lee was sobbing anyway.

*It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.*

(Azula was dead.)

*I never even got to say goodbye…*

(Azula was dead.)

*I want to be happy again.*

Azula was…

*I hate you.*
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

You'll do.

Like someone crawling through a tunnel, Mai found herself groping desperately through the darkness in search of happiness.

She hadn’t taken it as hard as either Zuko or Ty Lee, since she was far better than both of them at keeping her emotions reined in. She was the one who planned the funeral while Zuko walked the palace at night like a madman. She provided a steady shoulder for Ty Lee to cry on before the acrobat returned to the Earth Kingdom.

But just because Mai didn’t show the feelings didn’t mean they weren’t there. She was pressing them down, subduing them, veiling her heart in shadow. The depression she had maintained while under her parents’ care returned, visible only to her. The happiness she’d had after the war, so brief, when she imagined that she could wed Zuko and be content with that, was gone. She had the crest in her hair and the title to her name, but it meant nothing.

If the doctors had known, Mai was sure they’d call it prenatal depression and leave it at that. And indeed, the growing roundness of her stomach didn’t come with any of the happiness she’d hoped for, even as servants and nobles alike gathered to assure her that the baby would be a strong heir for the Fire Nation. In direct contrast to her, in fact, the only time Zuko seemed happy was when he was touching her stomach, holding his ear to it, stroking it. In some ways Mai thought she’d become nothing more than the thing growing inside of her.

It didn’t suit her, pregnancy. She hated the tenderness in her breasts and the nausea that wracked her without warning, to say nothing of how movement was steadily becoming more difficult and her bladder felt smaller with each passing day.

She was quite visibly showing and in the fourth or fifth month of her pregnancy, by the doctors’ estimation, when Ty Lee swept back up on the shores of the capital, accompanied by Suki.

“She’s…not doing too well,” Suki explained to the Fire Lord and Lady. “I thought going home might help.”

“She kidnapped me,” Ty Lee said, attempting a smile that fell completely flat.

Mai was shocked by the change in her friend. Of course Azula’s death had affected Ty profoundly, but Mai had figured Ty Lee would deal with it as she dealt with all things in life—grieving, yes, but retaining her cheerfulness. Now, though, there was nothing pink about Ty Lee’s aura. Her braid was disheveled, dark bags had taken up residence under her eyes, and a smile no longer frequented her lips.

“You’re staying with us,” Mai decided. Ty Lee nodded, but said nothing.

But being at home didn’t seem to do anything at all for Ty Lee’s depression. She continued to lie in bed all day, and only the scene outside of the window was different. Mai found herself spending
more and more time with Ty and less and less with Zuko; the only necessary excuse was that Ty Lee was in need of comfort at the moment.

“I’m happy for you,” Ty Lee said, glancing down at Mai’s protruding stomach and back up at her face. A smile flickered on her lips, and Mai could tell it was sincere. That was Ty’s only comment on the pregnancy, and Mai loved her for that.

On an unseasonably cold evening, the two lay together under the sheets in Ty Lee’s room. The sound of falling rain kept them company, the only sound in the silence of the chambers until, after a long while, Ty Lee broke it.

“…Do you remember when Azula used to talk about becoming Fire Lord?”

Mai closed her eyes and let a chuckle escape her throat. How could she forget? She remembered Azula, during sex or afterwards, on those rare days when her mood was high. Her lips would curl up into a smile, and with an arm around each of them she would describe the future. A different future.

“Of course. She’d say that she’d be the first Fire Lord in history to take two Fire Ladies, but nobody would dare cross her.”

“She’d say I’d be at her right hand and you’d be at her left…”

“She liked you more.”

Ty Lee let loose a short laugh. The sound made Mai smile. There were images of her head now, of a woman with striking golden eyes and dark hair on a throne, her smile as deadly as her bending, and two women flanking her. It was such a seductive image. Nostalgia and sadness coiled inside of Mai. She leaned over to face Ty, whose eyes were slightly glassy.

They kissed, and then did more than kiss, while the rain came down outside. But it was wrong, all of it, because there was someone missing from the trio, and everything Mai did felt fake and disingenuous. When they’d finished, Ty Lee turned the other way and tried to muffle her sniffling.

Mai stared up at the ceiling, darkness coiling cold fingers inside of her chest again.

She wondered why she’d felt as if she’d betrayed Azula rather than Zuko.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

I hate myself.

Izumi was born on a cold spring day. She was smaller than usual, the doctors said, and unusually fitful. Her lungs were too weak to cry and she refused food. Mai stared down at her daughter and wondered whether she would die. She hated herself for not caring. She didn’t feel anything for the baby in her arms. It was just like every other baby she had ever seen. Nothing about it resembled her or Zuko or her parents. It was just pink-skinned, wrinkled, its eyes closed. Even after the doctors told her it was a girl, Mai didn’t think of it as one. It was just a thing, something that had existed inside of her and was now existing outside of her.

Fourteen hours of labor had left her exhausted, but Mai didn’t sleep. She stayed up, staring down at her baby, wondering if Izumi would survive.

She was still alive in the morning, and the doctors said that was a good sign. Mai forced her lips to smile. Ty Lee was there, in the afternoon, rubbing Mai’s back, when Izumi at last found breath in her lungs and started crying. Zuko ran over to pick up the baby, exclaiming with joy, but Mai didn’t feel anything. She didn’t think she’d have particularly cared if the creature died. She hated herself for that thought.

The doctors all said feeding was a wondrous bonding experience, but then they had said that about many other things. When she held Izumi to her breast, and when the infant latched on and began to suckle, Mai felt only discomfort. It felt unnatural, and that was mystifying to her, for surely childbirth was one of the most natural experiences of all?

Zuko became aware of her apathy toward their child that night.

Izumi was to sleep in a delicately carved crib, set apart from their bed but close enough that they could feed her if need be. They had discussed a wet nurse, but Mai had thought it would be best for the child to be as close to her as possible. She didn’t want to repeat her parents’ habit of treating her as a doll, an object—a goal which she already seemed to be failing, given her lack of feeling toward Izumi.

Izumi woke them both with an earsplitting screech. Rather than making Mai want to leap up and feed the brat, she simply pulled her pillow over her ears. The sound went on and on, and the longer it went on the more Mai hated that thing in the crib. Why wouldn’t it stop screaming?

Eventually Zuko lifted Izumi from her crib to place her in Mai’s arms. Then, and only then, did Mai bother to feed her, though she couldn’t help the resentment.

She hoped it would get better. (It didn’t get better.)

The doctors called it post-partum depression now, and Mai resented them for it. Izumi spent more and more time with servants, all of whom were eager to play with the girl who could one day take the throne.
Weeks stretched into months. Izumi grew. She was a daddy’s girl. Mai watched Zuko and her daughter from afar, feeling vaguely as if theirs was a family that no longer included her. The thought didn’t disturb her. Her apathy toward Izumi had extended into apathy toward everything.

She spent more and more time with Ty Lee. The affair had ceased seeming wrong. It was almost predestined. Mai had touched Ty long before Zuko; their relationship had far more to it, and both of them shared a bond in the unforgettable wielder of blue fire who was now nothing more than ashes.

“I suggested Azula for a girl,” Mai said one day, while they lay naked together under the sheets. She didn’t look at Ty’s face. “Zuko thought I was joking, so I said I was.”

“It wouldn’t be right,” Ty murmured. She was speaking as much to herself as she was to Mai. “Nobody was like Azula. Nobody could ever come close.”

They lay for that like an infinitely long time, both trapped in their respective worlds. Ty Lee hated Azula for dying. Mai hated everything else except Azula.

And she hated herself most of all.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

You remind me of me.

Five years.

People said time healed all wounds, but that was one of the most egregious lies Mai had ever encountered. Time didn't fix anything. It just made everything seem insignificant through comparison. Azula had been dead five years, but it might as well have been yesterday. She was still a fixed figure in Mai's dreams, still haunting her waking thoughts. Azula would never leave. Mai supposed she deserved that. Ozai was still breathing in a cell across the city. And Azula was nothing more than memories.

"Nobody else cares, I think," Ty Lee had said, dreamily, a few months ago. "We're the only ones who think she's worth remembering. And when we die, there'll be nothing."

Mai felt like a horrible person. She, who had sworn never to be like her parents, was turning into a terrible mother herself. She was disconnected from Zuko and Izumi, stranded on a different plane. They were moving ahead into the future, while tenacious threads connected her with the past.

She smiled and hugged Izumi and did the prescribed motherly behaviors, but only when they were demanded. Her daughter always had to approach her. But the smiles and the hugs were fake, just trappings expected by her role. She wasn't really trying. She wasn't really a mother.

Zuko was enamored with his daughter, spending as much time as he could with her. Between that and his duties as Fire Lord, he rarely had leftover time for Mai. He always apologized and always made it up to her, but she didn't really care. They rarely made love anymore; even when Zuko joined her in bed and initiated sex, she would decline. The golden eyes and the dark hair were an overpowering reminder of someone else.

If Zuko guessed she was having an affair, he didn't show it. And Ty Lee wasn't as despondent as she had been. She spent a good portion of her time at the barracks, sparring. The exercise was good for depression, she said. It kept the memories at bay.

So now it was Mai lying alone in the dark, inventing excuses to not spend time with her daughter and detesting herself for it. Her only companions were memories, though she knew reflecting on them was only making the depression worse. Why couldn't she be happy again? Why couldn't she love her daughter like Izumi deserved? Why did Azula have to die?

She remembered a day, years ago, tainted golden by the passage of time.

_It was just Mai and Azula, together in the palace, on a warm afternoon. Mai was sitting naked by the window, trying to reconcile her relationship with Zuko and the things she had just done with the princess. Her mind and her body were disconnected, erratic._

_"Imagine if I told Zuzu about this," Azula purred, rising from the sheets to join Mai. Her touch was fiery, and yet it made Mai shiver._
"He wouldn't believe you."

"Wouldn't he? Zuko's always been the jealous type." Azula's fingers, so gentle when they wanted to be, were wandering across Mai's throat. Her other hand played in Mai's black hair. Both sensations were infinitely pleasant, and Mai hated herself for thinking so. "Imagine if I told him about your infidelity. That I know you better than he could ever dream of knowing you. That I've made you cry out loud enough to wake the whole palace...that I know exactly where to touch you to make you scream."

Mai had to hold back an authentic moan as Azula's fingers found their way between her legs. The princess, always merciless, was quick to move in and suck the flesh along Mai's neck. Spirits, it felt incredible. Zuko was always so hesitant, so gentle. Azula took what she wanted and happened to make Mai feel good along the way.

Just as the sensations were building up inside of her, Azula withdrew, leaving Mai panting and frustrated. The princess laughed, knowing exactly what she'd done.

"I like you, Mai. You remind me of myself."

And she'd gone, leaving Mai to sit alone and stare out the window, wondering exactly what was wrong with her, guilt eating away as she pictured Zuko, woefully unknowing of what his sister was doing to his girlfriend.

And now the memories were equally as enticing, drawing Mai away from her husband and daughter. What use was there in living in the present when the past seemed so lovely in hindsight? So she slept, hoping for dreams, the only ways she'd ever see Azula again.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

I want you to hate me.

“Mom hates me.”

Ty Lee had grown extremely fond of the small girl she considered her niece. Even as she became more and more reticent around others, spending little time even with Zuko and Mai, she always had a smile for Izumi. And the young princess certainly seemed to reciprocate, always beaming at the prospect of spending time with Ty Lee, willing to share thoughts she wouldn’t tell her parents.

But Ty didn’t know how to respond when she heard those exact words come from Izumi’s lips. Mai didn’t hate Izumi, she knew that much, but it wasn’t a simple enough issue to hand-wave aside. Mai avoided discussing her daughter…and her conversations with Ty Lee had dwindled, so that these days their interactions were far more physical than anything else. Ty Lee felt, with a certain sadness, that their affair would draw to a close soon. She didn’t want to let Mai go, because the Fire Lady was still the closest thing she had to a princess long gone.

“Auntie! Are you listening?” Seven-year-old Izumi waved an impatient hand in front of Ty Lee’s face, snapping the acrobat out of her thoughts.

“Mai doesn’t hate you,” she said automatically. “She’s just having trouble, that’s all.”

“Trouble?” Izumi scrunched up her nose. “She’s acting the same way she always had. If it’s a problem, it’s one that’s been ‘round my whole life.”

It was hard to look down at the girl sometimes, with her golden eyes and dark hair. She took more after her father than her mother, and the resemblance to another lost family member was striking. Ty Lee wondered if that wasn’t part of why Mai was so prickly around her daughter, but she didn’t know how to explain that to Izumi.

“Before you were born,” Ty Lee began, and then hesitated. “Very soon before you were born, actually, someone your mother and I were…someone we knew very well passed away.” The words were enough to make a lump rise in her throat. “Mai took it very—very badly. I think seeing you upsets her because you look like her—you look like Azula.”

“Azula? My real aunt? Dad talks about her sometimes.” Izumi tilted her head to one side, all the curiosity of a child with none of the weight. “He says she’s the reason I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

It was a struggle, then, to speak without letting her voice crack. “…Yes. Ask your mother about her. She won’t bring it up on her own.”

“Mom, who’s Azula?”

Her fingers reflexively clenched down on the blade, and before she knew it a dark red stain was spreading across the pale skin of her hands. Mai had promised herself that she would no longer play with knives after giving birth. It was only one of many oaths that had fallen by the wayside.
“Why are you asking me this?” It took several long, measured seconds not to snap, not to shout at her daughter. That was one covenant she still held as sacred.

“I—Ty Lee told me to,” Izumi said, startled and bewildered by her mother’s response. “Mom, your hand!”

“I’m fine.” Mai brushed the blood away, barely even noticing the tingling sensation of lingering pain. “Izumi, I’m sorry, but I can’t talk about that. Not now. Please, leave me alone.”

Mai stood still for many long seconds after her daughter had gone. She had been living for so many years like a sleepwalker, waiting for someone to push her awake, and now the spell had been broken. The sound of Azula’s name, one that she had repeated over and over in her mind but not heard in quite a long time had been the signal. She had lost too much time to a phantom. Her daughter was real, flesh and blood, and she deserved a mother.

She made the walk to the rooms where Ty Lee had lived for years now and stood outside the doorway for several long minutes. Once she stepped over the threshold, returning would be impossible. Upon waking, it was never a possibility to return to the same dream.

But she did step forward.

“You have to go,” Mai said, abruptly, without prelude and without ceremony. Ty Lee didn’t look shocked, only sad.

“Okay.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine. It’s always been me. And having you here—Izumi needs me. I can’t keep doing this.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

As Mai was leaving, Ty Lee spoke again.

“It’s not too late. Izumi still loves you. She’s just waiting for you to take the first step, I think. Just tell you that you care about her, and mean it.”

“I know,” Mai sighed. That was the problem. “It would be easier if she hated me.”

And even as she took those steps back toward her family, Mai couldn’t feel happy, because she felt like a traitor. Moving on felt like forgetting Azula. And part of her wanted to continue to dwell in dreams where she was the wife of a different Fire Lord, where happiness came with power and conquest and passion instead of rebuilding and diplomacy.

For the second time in her life, Mai betrayed Azula.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

You remind me of someone.

Izumi was fourteen years old when the day arrived, when Mai made up her mind to answer a question that had long hung in the air between them. She wouldn’t have been surprised at all if her daughter didn’t remember asking, but that wasn’t the point. She wasn’t just doing it for Izumi.

“You asked me, a long time ago, who Azula was,” Mai said. They were sitting together on one of the patios leading out into the gardens, drinking tea and watching the sun set.

Izumi’s face came alive with curiosity. She turned such that the sun’s light caught hold of her glasses, making them shine white for a few long seconds. Mai was eternally grateful for the spectacles. They reduced the resemblance significantly.

“My aunt? Da--Father never talks about her anymore. I thought you must have said something to him.”

“No,” Mai said. She stared down into her cup. “I didn’t.” He was just forgetting, like all of them were, like everything was.

“Well, come on! What are you going to tell me about her?” Izumi had all of Zuko’s impulse and none of Mai’s restraint, another tendency that set her apart from her aunt. It was a difficult trait, and it seemed to be getting worse, not better, with age. Just the last month, Izumi had been caught trying to ride one of the komodo rhinos out of the city.

“Don’t rush me,” Mai said, as sharply as she would allow herself. Izumi fell silent, probably sensing that this interesting story was at stake. “…Azula was…she was…”

And after waiting so long, the words failed her. How to describe Azula? Like a hurricane of fire? Like the sun, all-consuming and so very hot? But those similes were pitiful attempts to grasp at the princess. They hinted at nothing of how Azula’s lips looked when she smiled, or the way her eyelashes cast a shadow on her cheek, or how gracefully she moved when fire was in her hands. Similes couldn’t describe the scent of her sweat and her skin, or the texture of scars across her, or the sins she’d whisper in Mai’s ear.

Abruptly, the Fire Lady felt as if she’d been punched in the gut. Bringing the memories to the surface elicited a visceral reaction from her. She could see Azula clearly in her mind. She could smell the princess’s hair and hear her honeyed voice.

“Mom?” Izumi said hesitantly. Mai turned to face her daughter, blinking more quickly than usual in the hope that the tears would go away.

“Do you know what your aunt did?”

“Sure! She was at Ozai’s right hand. She fought the Avatar and captured Ba Sing Se. She tried to kill Dad, but he beat her!” One thing that Azula and Izumi shared, at least, was their eagerness to get an answer right. Even now Izumi’s eyes were shining as she waited for approval from her
mother, approval that Mai wasn’t about to give.

“Beat her…is that what the historians say? And do you know what happened to her after the war?”

Izumi hesitated, frowned, and shook her head. Mai sighed. Her daughter was still so young. She’d had the luxury of growing up in peace. She’d had the luxury of a childhood.

“She died.” Mai said. It was hard to say. “She was…committed to a mental institution, and she refused care.”

Izumi’s eyes grew huge. “Oh. I thought…I guess I just assumed she was locked up somewhere. Why didn’t she want help? Was she just too proud?”

Mai remembered the reports the doctors had given her of Azula battling waking nightmares, resisting all human contact, sitting and staring at walls for an endless period of time. They had poked and prodded her and taken her apart as an experiment, and now she was dead.

“No. I don’t think that was it. But that’s not the point.” The things Ozai had done to his daughter were not Mai’s to share, so she did not share them. It felt bitter, twisted, concealing such a thing from Izumi when Azula had already endured years of abuse by that age. “I’m sorry, Izumi. I haven’t been the best mother to you. I haven’t been a good mother to you. But when she died, it was very hard for me to recover.”

Izumi said nothing. She was staring very intently at her mother. Mai was looking out at the setting sun, at the rays of gold reaching out over the gardens and the city beyond.

“I loved her.”

Saying the words aloud when she had never even admitted them to herself broke something inside of Mai. A wall came down. Suddenly there were tears in her eyes, the tears she had never been able to shed at Azula’s funeral.

“Mom!” Izumi reached out to place a gentle hand on her mother’s shoulder. Mai tried to fight back the tears, but it was useless. They were coming like the rain. And it was just her, and her daughter, and the golden sunset, and the memory of someone long dead.

“I loved her.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

I can be like you.

Ty Lee was the first of them to go. She had been traveling with the circus again, now freakish not only in her contortional ability but also in her age. The doctors said it was nothing but a heart attack. She finally returned to the Fire Nation in death, where Zuko helped to pay for her funeral. Mai watched flames consume another lover and felt sure that her time was coming too.

Ty hadn't had children, hadn't ever even married. Mai wondered if she had been lonely. Perhaps forcing her from the palace had been wrong. Perhaps an alternate future could have been, one where she continued her affair with a woman and a memory.

At this funeral, too, she stood dry-eyed while the companions around her cried. Zuko was on her right, tears catching in the wrinkles around his eyes. Izumi was on her left, also crying, though Ty Lee was nothing more to her than a figure from her childhood. At the end of the group was the teenaged Iroh, standing gravely to support his mother. His face, too, was devoid of tears, but Mai thought that was simply because he'd never known Ty Lee. She wasn't crying for different reasons. She wondered if Ty Lee would go to the Spirit World, and if there would be someone there waiting for her. Now there were two friends beckoning her to the grave.

Forty years earlier, Izumi had traveled to see the ancient dragons her father had encountered. It was to the awe and astonishment of the whole world when she returned bearing two eggs, one blue and one scarlet. Zuko had taken charge of the red dragonling, while Izumi reared the blue. She had asked her mother whether Azula was a suitable name for the creature. Mai had imagined what it would feel like to hear the name day after day, referring not to an irreplaceable princess but to a beast, and she had told her daughter no. But even after that, she watched the blue dragon grow, spread its wings, and breathe beautiful fire, and she wished she believed that Azula's spirit had been reincarnated into such a thing. Azula deserved such a noble form.

Happiness came back to Mai. She felt closer to Azula and Ty Lee than she had in decades. Soon they would all be alike again. Soon they would be together again as ashes, as spirits, as death. She had waking visions of the other two. She would hear the sound of the swish of fabric, hear laughs, as if they were all still teenagers playing their games.

Less than two years after Ty Lee's death, Mai fell ill. The doctors tried what they could, but ultimately they had to announce a dismal prognosis to Zuko: his wife was dying, and there was little they could do to prevent it.

Now she lay in her bed, a cough wracking her throat, a fever tearing its way through her skin. Izumi, Iroh, and Zuko took turns in sitting by her side, holding her hand. Mai didn't see them. She was seeing other people, distant visions filtering through time and space. She didn't know whether Ty Lee was really lying at her side, or whether it was just a hallucination. She didn't know whether it was really Azula's hand in her own. But she could imagine that it was, that her old friends and lovers were there to guide her on, waiting somewhere beyond.

Mai died smiling, peaceful, with the sun shining on her.
Ty Lee died doing what she loved, surrounded by those who cared for and admired her.

Azula died before she turned twenty, alone in a cell, forsaken and cold.

They remembered the romance differently. One looked on it with bitterness and fury, sure it had been a lie, sure it had been a construction. One looked on it as something that had been wonderful and far too brief, becoming painful in its aftermath. And one remembered it with nostalgia, wondering what could have been different, knowing she was the catalyst.

But the affair itself remained unchanged. Whatever meaning they attached to them, the kisses were always only kisses.

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