The war is over, but neither the Fire Nation nor the royal family are at peace. Memories of the absent Ursa point to an unresolved mystery. Azula must deal with her mind, Ozai with his past, Zuko with a dangerous clan of usurpers. And demons are never easy to face, especially when they become tangible.

(Continuation of AtLA, loosely based on the Search and Promise)

Notes

This is an Avatar fanfiction I came up with over a year ago. I've been agonizing over this chapter pretty much since day one, and I think it's about time I posted it! To elaborate on the summary, this is a story about the four members of the royal family: Azula, Ozai, Zuko, and Ursa, and what happened to them after the end of the show.

I did read the Search and Promise comics, but I wasn't completely satisfied with what they did with these characters' backstories. Still, I think the comics had something good going on, though they ended up taking it in a direction I wouldn't have gone. So in this story, I included the elements that inspired me and used them in the ways I thought were better. But as for the plot itself, this story does something different from the comics. Mainly, it will be a continuation of the show, but focusing on these four and the time after Sozin's Comet. All the
other characters we know and love will also be there, like Aang, Sokka, Katara, etc., and some OCs to color things as well. I hope it'll be something you'll enjoy!
Waking Up

It was the end of her world. The blazing trail of Sozin's Comet had faded from the sky, and down below, the last of the flames that remained from the battle were turning into a cloud of smoke that drifted up from the silent plaza. It should have been the site of her coronation, the place where she would have begun her reign as Fire Lord for a long and prosperous lifetime. Now, the wooden columns that surrounded the square were scorched black and the red pavilion roofs had gaping holes from where her fire blasts had hit. And she was lying on the floor, hands chained to a metal drain, her face turned awkwardly towards the blank wall behind her. She had broken down there just moments before in front of her enemies, in a strange combination of fire and tears.

…

("We can't leave her like this. We have to get her inside.")

("I know. I'll get the Fire Sages. They'll take her back to the palace.")

…

She had finally been defeated.

…

("Let it be known that the Fire Prince has won the throne from his sister, the princess. By trial of Agni Kai, he is now the lawful Fire Lord.")

…

Finally, the thing she had feared above everything else had come true. She was nothing. Her sea of strength was a withering pond, and her stronghold of calm was a fragile mask, one that had shattered the minute she had put it to the test. Her composure had dissolved into a flurry of raging flames, her perfection knocked out by a sequence of falls and fumbles, letting the disease that had lurked inside of her soul seep out and spread through her body. The thing left behind in the aftermath was a shadow, a ravaged shell of hatred and torment.

The monster they had always known her to be.

Now, blinking her wet and reddened eyes, she looked up.

…

("Wait, what is she doing…?")

…

Heat radiated from her hands and began to simmer the chains. The metal lit up with an orange glow, then with a tug, she snapped her wrists free. The sense of destiny and purpose with which she had set out to fight was gone. Stumbling to her feet, she turned away from the ruined plaza and ran.

…

("She's getting away!")

("Stay here, Zuko. We'll pin her down.")
She ran and ran, bursting out into the quiet city and tore through the network of empty streets. She heard the sounds of people rushing after her, but her own breath and footsteps soon drowned them out. The only thing she wanted was to get away, to scramble out of the pit of hell that had engulfed her and get back to sanity. She would run to the end of the continent if she had to. She would plunge to the bottom of the sea. She would do anything, if only it would undo what had happened and bring her back to the person she had been before.

The footsteps grew louder from behind. Someone blasted a jet of water at her feet and tripped her, but she stumbled back into balance and slipped away. She no longer cared whether or not they were gaining on her. Her surroundings were blurring and her thoughts were spinning into a frantic craze. She was in another world.

All they would find from her back in the real one was a broken mirror and a fallen brush. But as for what had happened there, they would never know.

Like a flame, she had ended in a whisper.

("Wait, where did she go? I just lost her!")

("There! On the roof!")

("She's about to jump!")

Flight. Freedom.

("No!")

And then she was falling.
("Katara! What happened?"")

("She tried to jump from one roof to another and she fell. The Fire Sages put her to sleep before she could run away, but she's still hurt.")

...

...

("We cannot be certain about her condition, my prince. The run was more dangerous for her than the duel. We will keep her in this trance for as long as we can, but it won't last forever. You must make a choice…")

...

...

...

The voices lingered for a little while longer, growing fainter and deeper. Then they slipped away.

...

For a long time afterward, there was nothing. Not pain, or sounds, or movement. The storm of emotions that had churned inside her mind began to subside, the memories of battle slowly dwindling until they vanished like a forgotten thought.

Her mind sailed through a progression of dreams. She saw vast forests and rushing rivers, her vision skimming over miles of treetops and sparkling water. She saw tanks chugging through open fields, groups of faceless soldiers marching beside them and holding up her veiled palanquin. There was the enormous metal drill she had driven to the edge of a city wall, its interior lined with pipes and rivets, eliciting a constant hum as it moved on towards its goal. But she was starting to forget what that goal had been. Names and conversations tumbled through her memory — people to chase, plans to finish — but all of them spun into the same conglomeration of nothingness.

Soon, she felt a sense of exhaustion wash over her, and she imagined how glad she would be to go back to her room and sleep. Take off her rigid shoulder plates and boots, slip on a comfortable robe and ease into her bed, like at the end of a day that had stretched for too long. Her room would be sunny and quiet, for once devoid of servants who always worked so hard to please her, but truthfully took away from the time she wanted to spent by herself. She'd pour her own water for a change, close her own curtains and sleep for as long as she wanted to. Then she'd wake up, and without telling anyone, slip out of her room and walk around the palace alone. She'd withdraw deep inside it, to a place where the halls were empty and still and she could lose herself in the maze of columns and carpets. How often she had done that as a child… peered through open doors, snooped around dusty furniture that stood so patiently awaiting its users. But now she never did anymore. Because she knew that the people who had occupied those rooms were gone. The years had whisked them all away, and as she grew up she had gravitated towards the frontal wings, the ones that glimmered with life and activity. The old places gave her a nervous, musty feeling that she didn't like.

Still, the pull from her mind never quite went away. Her footsteps pattered quietly as she moved through the shadowy corridor, surrounded by looming walls and a long floor streaked with moonlight. She hadn't been in this place for years. It was the inside of a separate house that stood by the palace, where she had lived as a young girl. She passed through the familiar spaces, somber recognition stirring inside her. Finally she reached the end of the hallway and turned, coming to a
shorter path that led to a closed door. Her old room. The wall to her left was lined with tall windows, with white curtains that billowed out from a breeze she couldn't feel. They were like ghosts, gracefully undulating, completely silent.

She stood in place for a long time, watching them move. And right then she got the feeling that something was approaching her. She turned around, scanning her surroundings, but didn't see anyone else. And yet before long, the presence seemed to reach her. It grew so tangible that she could feel it hanging in the air like mist and sense its watchful gaze reflected in the shine of the decorative vases. And she recognized it… it was the same thing that had been tugging at her mind when she was lying in the rubble, something that had followed her even as her pursuers had fallen behind.

And now it was here.

Her heart accelerated and she tensed for a confrontation, feeling around the rim of a recognition that she couldn't fully grasp. But before long, her concentration began to slip. The hallway began to dim, the walls and floor fading into the shadows, then they seeped out further to swallow the tables and vases. Soon the entire room vanished, and in its place a reddish-black expanse spread across her vision. Her closed eyelids tightened.

She was lying on her back now, her body spread out over a soft, dense surface. Her arms lay loosely at her sides. She wasn't moving, but it seemed that something beneath her was, producing a smooth, constant whir that sounded like wheels.

"... Everything is ready. You can bring her in..."

"... loosen the cords...?"

"... no, not yet... have to wait a little longer..."

The voices drifted in and out of earshot, accompanied by distant footsteps. But even as she began to distinguish their words, she couldn't recognize the people they belonged to.

She waited for a few more moments, but the sensations didn't change. Instead, they grew clearer, to the point where she could hear a number of bodies shifting around her and could almost feel the rubber wheels gliding along the floor.

At last, she gathered her focus and opened her eyes. The darkness cracked to reveal a slip of white light, followed by some hazy shapes. She started to pull herself up. But instead of a body, she felt a foreign, ten-ton weight budge from its place, triggering flares of dull pain in her joints and muscles. The feeling was so shocking that she immediately let herself go, letting her head sink back into the mold it had made in the pillow. Fear prickled inside of her like an electric spark. That couldn't be hers. It couldn't be her.

Swelling with defiance, she moved again, convinced that something was holding her down and confusing her perception. She tried to kick her legs, but all they could manage was a quiver, like the limbs of a stone sculpture that was crumbling to pieces.

The pang of fear came again, spreading and blossoming into painful sparks.

No...

A quiet rasp rose in her throat.

The coats and boots marched on.
She felt her face contort. A warm, bitter wave welled up inside of her, blurring the voices and sounds, then it washed over the world and pulled her under.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting alone in the darkness, face buried in her hands. "No, no, no, no!"

She repeated the word senselessly, like a child, cringing as hot tears spilled down her face. There was no one there to hear her now, so she let them fall freely, pouring out all her rage and anguish and listening to their wobbly tones resound through the silence.

Then unexpectedly, another voice emerged from the darkness. "What's wrong?"

It sounded like it belonged to a young boy. She couldn't see him, but he sounded strangely close, hardly an arm's length away from her. She gave a sniff in response. "I'm dead. I know I am! I was fighting someone back in the city and I lost. They're taking my body away now. They're going to put me in a tomb and burn it!" She covered her eyes again and let out another wail.

But moments later, she heard the boy laugh. "Open your eyes, silly!"

The girl paused through her tears, mouth trembling. She didn't want to believe him, didn't want to respond to the gentle touch of hope he was giving her. And yet, she couldn't push his presence away. The more time that passed, the more tangible it became, to the point where she could sense someone standing over her shoulder. Finally, she did as she was told. She began to blink rapidly, adding to the effort by rubbing her eyes. Gradually, patches of sunlight began to slip through her fingers, and when she lowered her hands from her face, she saw her a watery blue surface shimmering in front of her. It was a small pond. She was sitting at the edge of it, on a bank of ashy black sand, surrounded by a meadow of tall green grass.

The girl blinked in amazement. After a moment, she rose to her feet.

The wheels were gone, the bed was gone, and so was the strange, broken thing that lay on top of it. There weren't any rips or burns in her clothing, and her hair was pulled back neatly from her face, leaving just two front tresses to stir with the breeze. She turned around, and wherever she looked, she saw the same picture — miles and miles of hilly land stretching all the way to the horizon.

Someone grasped her shoulder. "There you go!"

The girl spun around. Two amber eyes met her gaze, and she jumped back in surprise, finally registering her companion in full height. He was boy about seven or eight years of age, though for some reason she was as small as he was. He was dressed in dark red and maroon, his black hair pulled up into a topknot. He smiled at her in relief. "I was getting worried about you. You've been sitting there for hours. I tried waking you up, but it didn't seem like you noticed me."

The girl blinked in confusion. "What... what happened to me? Where am I?"

"Where does it look like?" the boy replied. "You're back where you were before. That must have
been one crazy dream you were having, though. I found you sitting here this morning and you were mumbling about all sorts of stuff… something about a phoenix king and the end of the world. Sometimes you'd move a bit, like lift your arms and wave them around funny. Other times you just looked up, like there was someone standing in front of you, but then you turned around to talk to them. You didn't look like you were having a good time."

The girl felt her heartbeat quicken. "So none of that stuff happened? I was just dreaming?"

"Well, it seemed more like a nightmare from my end." The boy gave a nervous chuckle. "But there's never been a Sozin's Comet here, and I've been here forever!"

The girl looked at him blankly. After a moment of silence, she pressed her hands to her temples and shook her head. "No… that's impossible. It can't have been a dream. Everything was so real! Something was chasing me. I felt it watching me in the palace!"

"I was watching you," the boy offered.

But the girl shook her head harder. "No, it was someone else! I'm serious! It was after me and it was about to get me!"

The boy gave a pause. "Well, whatever it was, it can't catch you now. You're officially in the clear." He looked around the empty hills, then cracked a smile. "Heh. In the clear. Get it?"

The girl lowered her hands from her face. She started out at the landscape in frustration, but the emotion began to fade as the silence of the meadow replaced it. Had she been fighting? Now that she thought about it, all she could remember were a few fire blasts and some flurries of color. Then it all blended in with the rivers and the countryside from her dreams, and those were starting to become hazy too. The only things she could feel now were the warmth of the sun and the subtle sink of the soil as she shifted her weight.

The girl looked back at boy, who was watching her with his arms crossed, looking more humored than concerned. "What is this place?" she asked.

"It's my meadow," the boy replied. "I live here. I like it because I can do whatever I want with no one ordering me around." He found a rock on the ground and nudged it around with his shoe.

"Yes, but where is this? Are we in the Fire Nation?"

The boy frowned. "What's that?"

The girl lifted her eyebrows. "The Earth Kingdom?"

"Never heard of it."

"What do you mean?" said the girl. "Don't you know the four nations? The people fighting the war?"

Now the boy's puzzled expression became streaked with disbelief. "What war?"

"The war between the nations! It lasted for a hundred years!"

The boy began to laugh. "That really must have been some dream!"

The girl stood with her mouth hanging open, and when she finally managed to collect herself, she shook her head. "You're weird!"
The boy shrugged. "Well, I'm not the one who was talking to myself."

The girl gave a hhmph and turned away. But a few seconds later, she looked back over her shoulder to study him again, while he knelt down and began to draw in the sand. For what little he knew of the Fire Nation, the boy looked just like a royal child, with a golden flame clip on his topknot and an elegant trim on his collar. She turned back to him all the way, finally deciding to speak. "Who are you?"

The boy drew himself up proudly, laying a hand on his chest. "I'm Quin the Quester," he replied. "Quin the Quester?" A smile tugged at the girl's lips and she lifted a hand to cover it. "Why would you call yourself Quin the Quester?"

"Because that's who I am," the boy said. "I quest for treasure and save kingdoms and unlock mysteries!" He leaned forward into a warrior's lunge and punched forward an arm, almost as if to shoot a flame. Then he straightened, concluding the form by pressing a fist into his palm. "I tried Wen of the Wilds for a bit, but that made me sound like some kind of jungle man who haunts villages." He raised his arms and let his mouth loll open. "Wooooooo!"

The girl gave a full-blown laugh, clutching her stomach.

"So who are you?" the boy asked.

The girl's face fell, and after a moment of silence, she found herself looking away from his eager gaze. "Well, if it was a dream like you said… then I guess it doesn't matter."

Quin considered this. "Oh. Well, that's okay. You don't have to think of a name if you don't want to. I just keep mine because I like to narrate what I do." He brushed some sand from his knees and stepped away from the pond. "But now that you're here, we can be a double team! There's lots to do around here. We can go rock-skimming and rope-jumping and fishing... Then when it's nighttime, we can play Scavenger Hunt. That's when we go around and look for an object. I've always wanted to play Hide and Explode too, but I could never get another person."

The girl frowned. "So there's really no one here but you?"

Quin nodded. "Yep." But then he paused, and tilted his head to the side. "Well, there is the old man. But he's never around for long, so he doesn't count."

"Who's the old man?"

"I don't know," Quin said. "But he likes to take walks around here sometimes. I always see him carrying flowers." He squinted and looked out into the distance. "You actually missed him by a couple minutes. He left when I was still sitting with you. I wanted to follow him that time to see where he'd go, but you seemed more important."

The girl lowered her gaze, feeling both heartened and guilty. "Oh. Well... maybe we'll see him again."

"We should. He always comes about every other day." Quin turned back to her. "But in the meantime, I gotta show you around. This could be your place too. We'll share it together." He paused. "If you're not going anywhere else, I mean."

The girl gave a shrug. "I don't think I am."

Quin brightened. "Then come on!"
He reached for her hand, and after a brief hesitation, the girl took it. Almost immediately, she felt a sharp tug and laughed as the boy began to pull her down the hill. The sensations were firm and real, much more real than the broken, disconnected memories of the palace. Indeed, the more time that passed, the more she felt those things evaporate and vanish. Instead, her perception took in the boy, his voice and his radiant smile as he began to talk and point things out, nearly too fast for her to keep up. And she took in the meadow, which seemed to have no bounds and was completely empty except for them.

Occasionally, however, Quin revealed to her what seemed like signs of human presence. First, there was a Pai Sho set at the top of one of the hills, which he said he had found there a long time ago. It was set for two on a flat boulder, but since the boy could never find a playmate, he played a game he called Solo-Sho, which involved moving the pieces in complex sequences to make patterns. The girl sat with him while he explained the game, staring in astonishment at the colorful checkerboard, at the stone slab that was perfectly round, perfectly sized for the game.

Next, Quin took her to a group of large stone disks standing on their sides and showed her how he climbed on top of them. He tested his balance and leaned over the edge, peering upside-down through the square hole in the center. "Hey there!" he said.

The girl laughed in response. But as Quin sat up and began to try hopping from one stone to another, she found her gaze lingering on the perfect, identical squares, swearing to herself that they reminded her of something.

Quin led her onward, following what seemed to be a mental compass. Though to the girl's eyes, the low-lying hills didn't reveal much - only more rocks and occasional clumps of flowers. The blooms came in a palette of colors, from pink to orange to violet, though the majority were white like the clouds. After a while, she and the boy reached another pond. This one was larger than the one where she had been sitting, but had the same black sand at its banks. Quin meandered over to it and sat down, as if it were a habitual resting point. The girl followed suit, kneeling down by the water. The surface was still as ever and provided a mirror-like reflection of her face.

"Funny I saw you by a pond," Quin murmured. "Sometimes, when I look at them long enough, I see things too. Almost like visions of different places. One I saw a lot was this swamp-forest. It's got all these weird black trees and sandy mounds coming out of the water."

The girl's eyebrows climbed. "How's that possible?"

Quin smiled. "It's the water. It's got a special power. It keeps a connection." He reached into the pond and began to skim his fingers through it, making little waves.

The girl continued to sit still, carefully studying her reflection, but beyond it all she saw was the dark sand bed. She sighed in resignation, then her thoughts revved up again and she began to tap her chin with her finger. "So, could you actually go to the places you were seeing?"

"I don't know. I've never tried." Quin reclined into the grass and looked up into the sky, squinting slightly. "But even if I could, I wouldn't. This is the only place I want to be."

The girl hugged her knees to her chest. "I remember being somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Home."

"Where's home for you?"
The girl thought for a moment, but for some reason she couldn't place her finger on it. "I don't know. It's definitely in the regular world, though."

Quin cracked a smile. "The Fire Nation?"

"Yeah."

He frowned. "So, what other nations are there?"

"The Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes and the Air Nomads," said the girl. "Each group of people lives together."

"And why were they fighting?"

The girl paused. For a minute, she pictured a red comet streaking across a sky, but then her mind went blank. "I don't remember."

Quin looked at her with a lifted eyebrow, but said nothing and settled back into the grass. After a moment, the girl followed suit, lowering herself down onto her back. The sky was bright and dotted with clouds. But right then, another image came to her mind - red haze, white smoke. And fire. Comet fire.

"... How bad is it?"

"... not sure... need to start the procedure immediately..."

Fear panged inside of her. The voices had sounded from the back of her mind, almost like they were tapping through from another world. And yet, the meadow was still there. She still felt the grass shifting around her and the solidity of the soil beneath her. The girl sat up slowly, looking around. Maybe it had been her imagination...

Beside her, Quin sat up as well. He seemed content as ever and had found a twig to play with. But the girl was uneasy. Once again, she felt the peculiar sense of disorientation, as if half of her mind were somewhere else. She hardly noticed that she had begun to stare at the pond again, until suddenly, a flash of red appeared on the water's surface. It lasted no more than a second, as if a kite had flown by overhead. But then it came again, this time slow enough so that she could make out a shape. It was a long red sleeve, rimmed with a gold cuff.

She wanted to call Quin over, but she found herself unable to move. All she could do was stare at the reflection of her own eyes, wide and bright amber, and right then, she saw the hazy outline of another face appear. But before it could materialize clearly, she heard a shout.

"It's him!"

The girl jerked upright. She tore her gaze away from the water and looked at Quin, who was on his feet, jumping and pointing. "It's him! It's the old man!"

The girl rushed to his side and scanned the hills. "Where is he?"

Quin let out a sound of frustration. "You just missed him. He went behind that hill. Come on!" He grabbed her hand.

The girl broke into a run after him, gaze darting across her surroundings, but she couldn't see anyone else. Quin however seemed to be following a surefire path. He slipped away from her and got ahead by several yards, but as he reached the top of a hill, he stopped. He stood in place for a while,
looking around, then stepped down with a shake of the head and came back to her.

"Nah. We're too late. He's gone." Quin shoulders were drooped in resignation, clearly one he had felt many times before.

The girl looked at him quizzically. "But you just saw him. How can you tell?"

"He disappeared. He was just walking, then he went behind a hill and never came out." He sighed. "I guess there's always next time."

The girl followed him as he started to walk away. "Why do you want to talk to him so badly?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling that he can tell me something. Or at least hold a decent conversation... I haven't had one in a long time."

"Then why stay here? Why don't you go someplace with more people?"

"I haven't had much luck with that." The boy's eyes drifted up to the clouds. "See, I wasn't always here. I tried living in a lot of other places, just plain towns and villages. But for some reason, I never felt like I belonged there. People would always sort of pass by me, and they'd never answer me when I talked to them. They hardly even looked at me. One day I was standing by a crate of apples watching two guys talking. And one of the apples fell, so the merchant bent down to get it. His hand went right through me. Like I didn't even exist."

The girl lifted her eyebrows. "Wow."

Quin gave a somber smile. "You can guess that made me angry. So eventually I just gave up and left. I told myself I wouldn't stop until I got somewhere where I'd never see another person again. I just kept walking and walking, and at one point I started feeling like my feet were climbing up something. And when I looked down, I saw that I was going up a really high slope. And then I got to the top and saw this place. He brushed his hand across the grass. "And here, it's different. I think about everything that happened and it doesn't seem so bad anymore. I don't want to go anywhere else because I don't need to."

The girl tilted her head to the side. "It can't always have been like that, though. Don't you remember anything that happened to you before?"

"Not really." Quin paused. "I mean, I guess I must have lived somewhere, but I don't remember where. And I don't remember anybody I might have known. Or could have known, even." He looked off into the distance. "For as long as I've been here, I've never seen another person come around. The old man's the only one who does. That means this place is real to him, just like it is for me. And that has to count for something."

After a moment, the girl set her eyebrows together. "Come on. If he was going in that direction, then he wouldn't just suddenly change his mind. He probably just found a faster way to go." She started forward, then looked over her shoulder to get the boy to follow. After a moment, he did.

The sky began to grow cloudy in the distance. The children kept going, rounding the top of another hill, and when the girl saw what was on the other side of the mount, she gasped.

Laid out at the basin of the hill was an enormous flat field filled with bulbous white flowers. It stretched ahead of them for a great distance, until it reached a towering wall made of white stone. The wall seemed like it had been a part of a larger structure before, with a sturdy shell and a square-toothed rim, but ended in a sagging, crumbling ruin on both ends.
The boy's eyes widened. "Whoa."

The girl stared at it in shock, speechless.

They carefully descended the hill and waded through the field. The flowers were all identical, bobbing indifferently as the children passed through them. The boy continued to turn his head as he walked, eyes wide in amazement.

"Wow. I've never seen this place before..."

They reached the wall and stopped, peering up at the rim. Then the girl's gaze alighted upon a plot of soil beside one of the wrecked sections. Someone had evidently been gardening there: there were a number of pots standing together, holding leafy plants, and various tools laid out beside them.

"That must be where the old man goes," she said.

"Must be..." Quin agreed.

They approached the garden and Quin knelt down. He picked up one of the pots, which held more of the same white blooms, and studied them. A somber expression crossed his face. "It's not like I don't wonder what it would have been like if I had stayed," he spoke up. "I know that if I lived in the regular world before, I must have had a family. And I'd go looking for them now if I could, but I don't even remember who they are. And it feels like it's been so long that they won't recognize me either." He dropped his voice. "I don't even know if they'd want me back... I mean, I must be the one who left them. And they've probably moved on from me already."

The girl stared into the boy's eyes as he said this. They were a light amber, and seemed older than he was.

It took a good deal of effort to pull away from his gaze, but nevertheless she did. She turned back to face the wall. And as her gaze ran over the cracks in the stone face, something in them triggered a disquiet. It started out as a small pang, but soon it swelled into a sharp desperation, like a wave advancing over the shoreline.

"... check complete, condition stable."

"Loosen the cords and we'll begin."

The colors of the world sharpened and outlines blurred. The girl felt her throat close up, and she turned back to the boy, breathless. "What's happening to me?"

The boy's expression clouded. "I don't know." His gaze went to the wall again. "Sometimes I wonder what I'm missing out on, though. I get this feeling that it's something important. And I know I probably didn't even appreciate it while I was there. I just kept obsessing over stupid little things instead of thinking about what really mattered. Because if I had, I'd probably still be there."

The girl kept looking at him, her voice barely a whisper. "What matters?"

The boy lowered his gaze. "I don't know. Just life, I guess. Being with people, talking to them." He looked up at her. "I think it's good that you remember other places. Maybe that means you can still go back to them."

The girl stared at him blankly. She didn't want to go back. She didn't want to remember. All she wanted was to stay in the meadow, but for some reason it kept feeling like something from outside was pulling her away.
She started to lift her hands to her head, but stopped midway and clenched them into fists. She felt a rush of dizziness, then the strange sensation of opening her eyes, though she was perfectly sure they had been open before. The horizon blurred into a hazy stripe. The wall faded behind a bright white light, and when she blinked again, the rest of the meadow was blotted out by shadows. She found herself looking up at a dark ceiling, where a large white lamp hung over her head.

The motion had stopped. The clanks had stopped. The bed was standing still, and she was lying on top of it, wearing what felt like a thin, long curtain. She shuddered, and in response she felt a strip of tightness around her wrists and ankles.

She wasn't in a sarcophagus. She wasn't in a burning room. That might have been comforting before, but now she had no doubt she was somewhere she shouldn't be.

The girl squinted and turned her head to the side. This time, she saw a little more — white coats and arms shifting nearby.

"Get the water ready."

"Disinfecting the other side..."

Hands placed something wet and cold over her stomach. Without a moment's notice, a sharp, brilliant pain erupted from the spot, like a burn from molten magma. She tried to scream, but what came out instead was a low, hoarse moan.

"... waking, she's waking!"

"We can't... her wake up ... injuries too severe..."

"... give her more of it..."

A moment later there came a puff of air, and a sweet, heavy scent washed over her. The white light blurred, and she felt a sickening drop as her head lolled to the side.

She fell back into the grass, her back striking a bumpy hill. When she opened her eyes, she found Quin kneeling beside her. His eyes were wide with concern.

"Hey! Are you okay?" He clasped a hand around her arm and pulled her up. The girl got to her feet, skin still prickling from the memory of the pain.

Quin helped her brush some dirt from her clothes, then backed up to let her collect herself. "That was really strange," he said. "You sort of... froze." He did an imitation of a person seizing up.

The girl shook her head. "Something's wrong. I keep seeing this room..." She rubbed her temples. "They're doing something to me. I think they're trying to..." But she paused, unable to finish. She just looked at the boy, who after a moment offered a smile.

"Hey. It's okay. If anything, you'll just end up back here again."

The girl looked at him. "Do you promise?"

Quin nodded. "Promise."

She did not respond. Quin held out his hand again. "Come on. Let's keep going."

She followed him through the grass, limbs heavy and shaky. In that span of time the sky had darkened over their side of the meadow, groups of clouds collecting over the hills. The wind had
picked up and was stirring the grass, though beyond the wall it was still sunny.

"Looks like there's going to be a storm soon," Quin said. "We better keep going. We might find a place to wait it out."

The girl followed him past the wall and they rounded the crest of another large hill. Here the land took a gradual plunge, tracing a path of dead grass and soil that finally became a rocky valley. It cut through the green like an open wound, the soil hued red and the trees gnarled. In the distance she could see the wrecked remnants of a plaza. Red pavilion roofs rose up from a large stone square, their surfaces charred and chipped. The walls that surrounded them were dirty and crumbling.

A sudden realization took over and her breath caught in her throat. "That's the place… that's where I was fighting."

Quin's eyes widened, but he didn't say anything.

They descended into the valley and approached the plaza, passing under the eaves of one of the buildings. Without being aware of it, they trailed off in separate directions. The girl saw a storm drain on the ground and went towards it. She knelt down, threading her fingers through the square gaps, but it was dry. She tested a nearby door that wouldn't budge and found a metal chain lying forgotten on the floor. Finally she stepped back out into the open arena. Here there were two long channels running down the center, groundwater splashed around their rims. She approached one of them and peered inside, but instead of a shallow pit she was met with a bottomless black hole.

She began to ponder the situation, but right then something sliced into her mind, tinting her vision red. The hands were back again, dabbing her with something cold that sent painful heat ripping through her skin. The girl doubled over, gritting her teeth. Maybe it would stop. Maybe if she kept still, they would think she died, and go away. Maybe, maybe…

Several more flashes of pain followed, each one like a jab of fire that scorched her insides. The girl clenched her fists, and when the pain faded, she relaxed with a heavy breath. What had they done to her? What had they reduced her to?

She stifled her breath again, feeling her eyes well with tears. But a moment later, she blinked them away.

"No," she muttered. "No. You're not through with me. I'll show you." She straightened and looked up at the sky. "All of you!"

... Another scream split the silence. Hands recoiled away from her.

"Did she just talk?"

"She's supposed to be unconscious. Give her more mist."

"Maybe we should do the bones first?"

"No. These burns are too severe. Some of them have been infected already, and if they aren't healed now, it might become systemic."

"What did she break, again?"

"Wrist, arm, collarbone, ankle… nothing we can't fix. But she must have been pushing herself to the
limit. She's overworked, physically and mentally."

"Poor thing. So young..."

STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT!

"Hold her down! She's convulsing!"

"Get the mist, quickly!"

"She already has too much in her, if we just keep going it'll end sooner—"

"No! We have to treat her like she can wake up at any moment. There's no telling how long the serum will hold out."

Hazy noises sounded in the background. Her eyelids pulled open at different degrees and she saw a bright lamp floating overhead. She began to fidget, feeling the mattress crinkle beneath her. But before she could do anything else, there came another puff of scented air, and something swooped down to strap her arms and legs to the bed. Simultaneously, her hands and feet were covered with what felt like heavy leather bags.

She fought unconsciousness as long as she could, feeling the water travel up to her shoulders and neck. The bursts of pain were duller now, but she clenched her fists against them, snarling senseless words. At last, she slackened with exhaustion and sank back as the world faded away.

"She said something again!"

"What was it?"

...

"Revenge? I don't understand..."

A pause.

"But you know. She almost killed them."

...

Killed who?

In the back of her mind, the girl spat. How dare those voices talk about her without even referring to her.

She slammed her eyes closed and waited for the plaza to return. Moments later, she saw herself stepping through a tunnel, emerging into full sunlight at the center of the arena. She looked around for the boy, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Quin?"

She turned round in place, scanning the buildings.

"Quin! Where are you?"

But the plaza was silent. She stood alone at the center of the arena, while in the meantime the sky continued to darken above her. Any minute now, the rain would come.
Not knowing what else to do, the girl sat down, crossing her legs in her customary pose, and began to think. The people had her captive somehow, and now they were doing something to make her submit to them. But she wouldn't let them. She would stay in the plaza as long as she could, even if it meant being destroyed along with it.

Slowly, she took a breath. "Okay, voices," she said. "It's going to be either you or me."

She took a deep breath and exhaled, anchoring herself to the landscape as much as she could. But before long, she felt something slice into her mind again. She grabbed her head in preparation for the pain, but the pain didn't come. What came instead was a presence, one that she recognized, one she became so acutely aware of that it momentarily drowned out the rest of her thoughts.

A long shadow rose up on the ground in front of her, and the girl felt herself freeze. She turned around, feeling the sink of dread, and there it was. Standing behind her, like an apparition, was the presence she had felt in her dream, in the rubble after the battle, in the real palace she had left minutes before it. It was the woman from the mirror. She was wearing a red robe, with long golden cuffs that draped down from the sleeves.

"Darling…"

The girl stared at the woman in horror. Then a second later, she snarled and shot a blast of blue fire at the apparition. But the flames dissipated as soon as they reached the woman's body, revealing her in the same state as before.

The woman looked at her with tired, saddened eyes. "It's me."

"Go away!" the girl shouted. She shot another blast of fire, then got up without a second thought and ran away. She zipped across the arena, passing the storm drain and hopping from the pavement onto the barren land. Somewhere in the realm beyond, the sounds from the voices and machines began to escalate.

"Finishing up…"

Her surroundings blurred and danced. The girl bit her lip and ran faster.

"Coming along well…"

FASTER!

Stumbling and sputtering, the girl reached the ravaged valley. She looked up and saw the massive slope looming in the distance, a slide of rocks and gravel that lead up to the meadow. There, atop the ledge, she could still see a stripe of sunny green land, and found herself filled with a sudden desperation to reach it. She had to. Maybe, if she did, everything would be all right.

Eyes set on her target, the girl quickened her pace. But the slope was too far away. The energy was draining out of her, her body slowing like a failing machine, and the faster she tried to run, the more sluggish her motions became. Soon, she was reduced to a lumbering walk. Then she came to a stop, and stood in place at the center of the valley, teetering. Finally, she collapsed, hands and knees falling into the dirt.

She had lost.

Somewhere far away, a finger brushed her shoulder.

"It's almost over, darling," a woman's voice whispered.
The girl gritted her teeth. *Darling.* How dare they.

She lifted her head, looking up at the meadow with exhausted eyes. Her mouth trembled. Seconds later, she heard a whisper of wind as someone approached from behind. The girl turned back, where the woman from the mirror stood over her, the hem of her robe brushing over the gravel. Her face was somber and worn, like the scorched, diseased land she had come from.

The girl rose to her feet, meeting the woman's gaze with a snarl. "You think I don't know what you're doing!" she said. "You think you've trapped me here. You think you have me pinned. But you're wrong. You can chase me and hunt me all you want, but I'll always get away. I'll fight you to the end."

She lifted her arms out in front of her, assuming a fighting stance.

At the same time, the woman reached out with her hand. "Azula…"

The girl smiled at the sound of her name. "*Azula!*" She bent her arms, sweeping two arcs in the air with her hands, and blasted two jets of blue flames from her fingertips. The fires combined into a single blast that swallowed Ursa whole, then rose and spread into a flat screen that obliterated her view of the plaza. Before the fire could fade, Azula turned around and lowered her fists to her sides, preparing to rocket herself away. But right then she felt a faint upward tug as the mysterious force from outside made itself known once more. She stole a glance at the sky, sensing the people that were moving around her body, louder and clearer than before.

She made her decision.

Azula lifted her arms, bending a tongue of blue flame in the air, and began to spin herself around in a circle. She kept the flames going, letting them gather in strength and volume, until the ring of fire that was forming around her nearly encased her body. At last, Azula stopped herself on her toe, pulling the mass of fire beneath her, and blasted off from the ground with a resounding boom. The force of it sent her rocketing upwards into the air, where she continued to fire flames from her fists and feet, looking up in anticipation as she got closer and closer to the clouds.

Her eyes flew open.

She lifted her head from the pillow, and the first thing she did was open her mouth and shoot a jet of blue flames at the ceiling. But a moment later, the fire was pushed down and spun into a ball, then with a single clap, a pair of hands dissipated them into the air. Simultaneously, several other arms pinned her down to the bed, and moments later, something heavy was wrapped around her like a cocoon, preventing her from moving.

"There. All set and ready to go."

Azula looked down at herself and glimpsed a bed, where the rest of her body was wrapped in a thick, heavy blanket. Someone gripped the bars of the bed and rolled it speedily down a hallway, turning her into another room. It was filled with hazy shapes, who were scurrying around, adjusting equipment and folding sheets. In the middle of a side wall there was a large empty space. Her bed was wheeled into it and parked.

Overhead, the face of a different woman swam into view and smiled.

"Well, honey, you gave us quite a fright back there. But fortunately it's all over now. Welcome to your new home."
Sometime later, Azula blacked out. She didn't know exactly when; the faces and voices simply began to blur in her mind, turning into some strange conglomeration of image and sound, before finally fading for the darkness of sleep - sleep of the heavy and fuzzy kind, where there were no dreams, and no movement for sheer exhaustion.

She woke up a few times in short bursts, gasping and blinking, her mind surging with scenes of rainstorms and clapping thunder. But she always found herself in the same room, lying on her back, with a blanket pulled up to her neck. The dimmed ceiling lamp gave off a murky orange light, which cast most of her surroundings into shadow, revealing only the silhouettes of cabinets and shelves. Her body seemed ten times heavier than before; where at one point, she remembered struggling to move her legs, now, she could hardly lift a single arm from the bed. But as she continued to fidget around, she discovered a tangible reason - her body was strapped down to the mattress by what felt like dozens of elastic bands, which reached horizontally from one side of the bed to the other, more or less trapping her in a single position.

As her waking periods grew longer, and the room around her clearer, Azula became aware that something was very, very wrong.

She was definitely someplace else. It wasn't in a dream, and it certainly wasn't anywhere in the palace. The bed she was lying in looked more like a metal fruit cart with a mattress tied on top. It had smooth metal bars running along all four sides, and wasn't much wider than she was.

To her right, there was a large stone countertop, which ran along the wall, stopped for the door, then continued a little past the corner. The surface was a smooth and sterile wasteland, with not a stray object in sight. Directly across from her stood an empty bookshelf, pushed against the wall like a white building block. But the worst came when Azula looked to her left and saw the window - a ghastly, gaping, metal sheet stretching almost from floor to ceiling, lined with the vertical grooves of tightly-closed shutters. A pair of curtains hung from a metal bar above it, but though they were currently drawn, the shutters didn't let any light shine through. On the whole, the room looked like an abandoned construction project, or some sort of torture chamber.

It was also astoundingly quiet.

Azula lay still for a long time, pondering the situation. Her head felt tired and clear, as if some powerful gale had blown through and swept away all of her former thoughts. Fragmented memories of a meadow and a boy still drifted up in her mind, but they were already so faded and distant that she had no way of piecing them back together. Meanwhile, her gaze ran across the room's every curve and corner, studying the shelves, the faucet, and the cabinet doors beneath the counter. But nothing came out of her investigation except for more silence.

After a minute, Azula narrowed her eyes. "Guards! Servants!"

No one replied.

Suddenly, a host of memories marched into her mind, and she slammed her eyes closed. She had banished them all. Then she had lost an Agni Kai to - no, no, there was no point in dwelling on that now.

Azula opened her eyes again. She turned her attention to the blanket, and after some thought, she gripped the edge with her teeth and tossed it aside. The sheets folded back to expose the sleeve of a
nightgown, and the thick black bands that held her down. She tried to heat them up with firebending, channeling warmth to her skin to make them stretch, but for some reason the heat didn't come. She tried to break free through sheer force of pulling, but the elastic held firm and pulled her back.

With a sigh, Azula let her head plop down on the pillow. After a moment, she sucked in a breath and turned herself as far to the right as she could, craning her neck down to see over the edge of the bed. She was about a leg's height from the floor. She swept her gaze more carefully over the bookshelf, hoping to find something sharp or pointy in its depths, but it was empty.

Azula settled onto her back again and took a breath. There was still one part of her they hadn't covered.

_Breathe. Focus._

She inhaled through her nose, preparing to blow fire on the blanket, but when she pushed her breath out through her mouth, nothing came out. Just regular air. Azula took another breath and repeated the cycle, but got the same result. With a groan, she clenched her fists and tried to make fire through her hands, but felt nothing, not even the slightest rise in temperature. She felt a flash of panic.

"No… no!"

Abandoning all composure, she began to writhe and flail, pulling against the bands with all the strength she had.

"No, no, NO!"

The mattress creaked under her fidgets, and the bed began to slide back and forth on its wheels. Before long, she heard a rush of approaching footsteps, and moments later, the door to her room burst open.

"She's awake!"

The lamp on the ceiling flashed and brightened, flooding the entire room with white light. Azula looked up to see three women bunched up in the doorway, one who had her hand on a switch on the wall and the other two who were peering over her shoulders. They were dressed in white kimono shirts and long skirts, all spotless and matching. Azula gritted her teeth at them. "What did you do to me?"

The woman by the light switch stepped forward, clapping a hand over her chest. "I don't believe it! And there don't seem to be any adverse effects from the procedure."

"We'll have to wait for the test results, though," said another, walking in after her.

"I asked you, what did you clunking buffoons do to me?" Azula shouted. "What happened to my firebending?"

"Nothing happened to your firebending," the first woman answered. She came closer to the bed, and with a jolt of surprise, Azula recognized her. She had been the one who had appeared after the dream, smiling and saying that it was all over. The woman's hair was short and wavy, and she had an annoying, dimpled face. Once she had looked Azula over, she pulled the blanket off and began to fold it. Azula jerked upwards, straining against the bands, and managed to lift herself a few inches from the mattress.

"Don't lie to me! I heard you all when you were talking! You did some sort of operation on me, didn't you? You took my firebending away!" Azula exhaled sharply, taking her aim at the woman's
face, but no flames came out.

The second woman stepped into view. "Honey, we didn't do anything to you. You have to calm down."

"You call tying me down and locking me up in this filthy shack doing nothing?"

The first woman draped the folded blanket over her arm and placed a hand on the bed. "Listen, sweetheart, just relax. You've been through a lot. We don't want to make the transition too sudden."

"What transition?" Azula shouted. "Tell me where I am!"

"Sssh. It's okay." The woman stroked Azula's arm. "You're in a hospital. The operation you remember was three days ago. You were hurt really bad, and we decided it would be best to keep you asleep while your body healed. Technically, you weren't supposed to wake up this early... we were expecting you to regain awareness by the end of tomorrow. But it's like I say, the body has a mind of its own sometimes!" She chuckled.

Azula looked around. She couldn't think of any place that reminded her less of a hospital. It was more like a bare room with equipment shoved in. The nurses looked out-of-place with their tidy attire, and the light cast a bland, waxy glow over their faces.

"I want to leave," she said at last.

"Honey, you're not going anywhere right now. Conscious or not, you still have to stay in bed for the prescribed time to let your body recover from the procedure."

"What procedure? What did you do to me?"

"We healed you," said the third nurse. She approached from her place by the door, arms crossed. "You were covered in burns and scrapes that got infected, so the first thing the doctor did was clean them and dose you with antibiotics. Then he stabilized your joints and gave you special serums to relax your muscles. Then we cleaned you up and put you to sleep."

The second nurse gave an emphatic nod. "You have to stay in bed until the effects of all the medications wear off," she added.

Azula stared at the women in dumb fury. What made the situation even more frustrating was that her memory was still drawing up a blank. From the time after the Fire Sages captured her, she could remember nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The wavy-haired nurse must have taken Azula's silence for submission, for she smiled. "Just relax for now. We'll give you a few days' rest, then we'll remove the bandages, and when you're completely healed, we'll bring the doctor in and he'll have a word with you."

Azula gritted her teeth. "I'm not going to see your stupid doctor! You're not going to heal me! I am going HOME!" She began to rock back and forth again, but the nurse steadied the bed and pushed Azula down by the shoulders.

"You are home, Azula. Now lie still. We're going to get you cleaned up." She turned away from the bed and walked off.

Azula watched the three women rush in and out of the door, her eyes leering behind jagged strands of hair. She fixed the appearances of the last two, noting the fire-insignia clips adorning their topknots. That meant they were definitely in the Fire Nation. They wouldn't have dared to wear
those if they were outside the kingdom.

One of the topknot-nurses went to help Annoying Dimples, wetting a towel in the sink. Meanwhile, the other bent down to open a cabinet, taking out a candle. Humming, she placed it into a shallow plate and lifted a finger to the wick. Azula watched as the nurse lit a small flame with her finger, and right then, a realization flashed in her mind.

Of course. Sozin's Comet.

Azula's heartbeat quickened.

The comet had passed, and everyone's firebending was back to normal. That meant that something had to have happened. The Earth Kingdom should be in ashes. She would hear word from her father any minute.

Annoying Dimples came over to the bed and dabbed Azula's face with a warm towel. After she finished, she handed it off to Topknot One, who washed it out by the sink, then gave it back. Meanwhile, Topknot Two waltzed over and placed her candle on the nightstand to Azula's right.

"Here. I thought you'd enjoy a little aromatherapy." The nurse artfully wafted the air around the candle, pushing a strange, grassy scent into Azula's nose.

Azula flinched away with a scowl. "Why don't you clean this place instead?"

Topknot Two began to laugh. "Oh, you silly!"

Azula began to twist at her binds, but Annoying Dimples held her down and pressed the washcloth to her neck. "Hold still, honey. I'm almost done."

Azula flinched away from the nurse's hand. "I'm not your dear, or your honey, or your darling, you stupid pig! I am the Fire Lord! Daughter of the Phoenix King!"

"Let's not get too ahead of ourselves here," Annoying Dimples said. "You can't work yourself up - you're not allowed. Take it as a mandatory spa-relaxation session. We want you to heal up a bit more before we introduce you to the doctor."

"What doctor?!" Azula shouted. "Where am I? Why aren't you people telling me anything?"

Topknot One winced, and Annoying Dimples braced Azula by the shoulder. "It's all right, honey, it's fine! Everything's fine. You'll find out everything soon enough. For now, we'll start with something simple. I'll tell you my name. Do you want to know that?"

"No!"

The nurse answered anyway, pressing her hand to her chest. "I'm Kira." She pointed to Topknot One. "That's Mira."

Topknot Two poked her head into Azula's field of vision, tossing a towel over her shoulder. "And I'm Nira!"

"We're your nurses," Kira said. "We're medical professionals, so you can rest assured that you're in good hands."

Mira offered a smile. "And we're from the Fire Nation, just like you."

Azula's growl became a snarl. "WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FATHER?"
Panic flashed in Mira's eyes. "This isn't working. Why don't we just have her sleep for the rest of the period and start everything like we planned?" She looked at Kira, but the other woman shook her head.

"No. She's just a little disoriented. The more time she spends awake, I think, the better. It'll make things much easier on her." Kira looked down at Azula. "Now lie still. We're going to test your blood."

Kira went to the counter to get a metal tray and rolled a stool over to Azula's left. She sat down and carefully pulled Azula's arm out of the bands, lying it on top of them. "Clench your fist, dear… that's it." She took an elastic rope and tied it around the top of Azula's arm, pulling it so tight that it dug into the muscle. Azula watched in horror as the nurse felt her arm with her fingers, finally isolating a small, bulging vein. She wiped the spot with a pad of gauze and took a syringe from the tray. "This won't hurt."

Kira poked the needle through Azula's skin, and Azula felt her entire arm constrict as ruby red liquid spurted into the syringe. Her arm went cold and numb, but at the same time she felt like something was being wrung out from inside of it, and as she watched the blood rise in the container, her heart began to pound.

"You're taking too much!" she shouted. "You're taking too much, you snake!" Azula started to shake her arm in an attempt to dislodge the needle, but Kira held her down.

"No! Goodness, dear, haven't you ever seen blood before? This is how much I'm supposed to be taking. It just looks like a lot, but really it's only a small percentage of your total volume. You have over a gallon more." Kira smiled.

Azula stared back at her, speechless. Once the container had filled to its full capacity, Kira took the needle out and pressed another cotton wad to the spot. She held the syringe out to Mira. "Take this to Isla," she said.

Mira nodded and left the room.

In the meantime, Kira took a wad of sticky tape and tied it around the gauze to hold it down. She looked at Azula, who was pale in the face. "There. Feel better?"

"No!" Azula shrieked. "I'm dizzy! I'm dying, you stupid wood-brain, you took too much blood!"

"Relax." Kira stroked Azula's arm. "A bit of dizziness is normal. It'll go away in a few minutes. Besides, we have to know how much medicine from the operation is still in your body."

"The operation where you took my bending away, you mean?"

Kira sighed. "All right. If you have to know, the reason you can't firebend is because we gave you a chi-suppressant while we were working on you. We didn't want you blasting us with flames while we tried to heal you, after all, so we dosed you with a serum that slowed your energy flow."

Nira, who was wiping the counter with her towel, turned around and nodded. "We couldn't give you too much, because you already had a lot of drugs in you, like the anesthetic and the antibiotics. They were already straining your chi flow as it was, so giving you too much of the serum would have caused a bad reaction."

Azula's breathing grew ragged. In all her life, she had never used more than herbal steam to cure a stuffy nose. "You've poisoned me," she said. "You didn't just strain my chi, you killed it. You killed my firebending!"
Nira laughed. "Don't be silly! We just dosed you a second time, twelve hours after we finished. Besides, you can't kill a person's chi. I mean, it's technically possible, with enough concentrations, but then you'd be dead!"

The nurse's kooky smile was met with silence. Azula looked at her a moment longer, then she grabbed the tray from Kira's lap and flung it at Nira's head. The corner bounced off the nurse's forehead, and she stumbled back with a "Yow!"

"I'll show you dead!" Azula pulled against the elastic bands, clawing at the air with her free arm. But Kira caught her wrist in mid-swipe.

"Relax! Honey, relax! That was some bad phrasing on Nira's part. Of course we don't want you dead!"

Nira, who had stumbled back against the cabinets, failed to keep her balance and slid to the floor. She sat up, blinking comically, then crawled over to the tray and began to pick up the fallen utensils. Azula settled back, but continued to glare at Nira, till the door opened again and another woman poked her head inside.

"The antibiotics have cleared, and there's no infection," the woman said. "There's a little anesthetic left, but since she's awake anyway, I'd say it's fine to do the physical examination."

Kira looked up at the new arrival and smiled. "Thank you, Isla!" She rose from her chair and went somewhere behind Azula's head, rustling wires and clinking locks. A moment later, Kira pushed the bed away from the wall and steered it towards the exit.

On their way to the door, Nira fell into step with them, rubbing her head. "Ouch!" she remarked, glancing at Kira. "Maybe we should get plastic trays instead?"

Azula lay still, looking up at the ceiling. The doorframe slid past, and they entered a narrow gray hallway. After coasting straight for a few seconds, the bed turned again, and they passed into another room, this one much smaller than the first. The only furnishings were a counter and some cabinets that hung on the walls. The window was another steel-clad sheet above the sink.

Mira was already inside, as was the fourth nurse who had appeared moments before. She had lank black hair that hung plain, past her shoulders. She turned around as Azula's bed came to a stop, and the other three nurses gathered around the sides.

Isla took a bottle of purple liquid from the counter and poured it into a syringe. "The serum's ready in case you need it."

"That's okay." Kira looked down at Azula. "We'll be well-behaved, won't we?"

Azula was too listless to respond. The dizziness had passed, but it still felt like a sheet of gauze was wrapped around her mind, making reality seem fuzzy and distant. She watched as Kira unstrapped her right arm and held it up in the air. The nurse bent the elbow and rotated the wrist, then spent a moment feeling the bones. With a nod, she laid it back down and strapped it in. "All clear here."

From the other side of the bed, Nira removed Azula's left arm from the straps and did the same check.

Meanwhile, Isla had turned back to the counter, where she had an assortment of bottles, pipets, and boxes. She took spoons of liquid and pinches of powder and mixed them all in some container that Azula couldn't see. Whenever she opened one of the wall cabinets, Azula would see shelves and shelves of glass bottles, their bellies filled with a rainbow of colors.
"What are you doing?" Azula moaned out. "What's all that for?"

"For you," said Nira. "Now relax your leg. We've gotta make sure your knee's in one piece. It took a pretty hefty bump when you fell from the roof, so we had to put it back together." She unlocked the straps from Azula's left leg and began to lift it.

Azula gritted her teeth. "I'm... not... sick!" She shook away from Nira's grip and kicked at the air. Nira ducked smartly, leaving Mira to get the full force of Azula's foot, which knocked her upside the mouth. Mira fell back, bumping into the counter and sending a rattle through Isla's workstation. Isla braced the surface with her arms. "Careful!"

With a grumble, Mira brushed her hair away from her face and pushed herself off. She lifted Azula's leg and continued the check, but this time her grip was harsher and her mouth curled downwards.

Nira moved on to Azula's ribs in the meantime, prodding each bone with her fingers like a professional excavator. Kira stepped over to Azula's other leg and began to test it. Midway, she looked over to Mira. "Mira, don't forget the reflex test."

Mira bobbed her head in a surly nod, then opened a drawer and took out a small wooden mallet. She turned back to Azula, who had begun to retract her leg, and grabbed onto her shin. "Hold still!" She attempted to pull Azula's leg back, and by accident her fingers dug into a large bruise on Azula's calf. Snarling, Azula kicked her heel into Mira's stomach, and the nurse doubled over, staggering back. But before she could collide with the counter, Isla caught her by the shoulders and set her upright.

"Yep. She's definitely recovered..." With a sigh, Isla nudged Mira forward, then turned to slide her mixing bowl into a far corner.

Meanwhile, Kira tapped Azula's right knee with the mallet, then did the same for the left. Once she was done, she and Mira strapped both legs down again.

"Great!" Kira said. "Everything's healed properly. Your bones and muscles are in perfect working condition."

"Does that mean we should take her?" asked Nira.

Mira nodded briskly, arms crossed. "Yes. I think we should. The sooner the better."

But Isla shook her head. "Not a good idea. She should sleep off the anesthetic first, so she'll have a clear mind."

Kira considered this for a moment, then nodded. "All right. I agree with Isla. We'll meet the doctor with fresh heads." She smiled down at Azula. "Okay?"

Azula was silent.

The nurses wheeled her back to the first room and parked her into her former spot. Then they broke apart and began to go about a series of tasks, like soldiers from a cavalry. Mira scrubbed the floor, while Kira stocked the counter with syringes, jars, and boxes. Nira placed a clock on the counter and wound it to read 10:30. A smaller arrow beneath the face pointed to a moon, indicating it was evening. Meanwhile, Isla migrated the contents of the other room, bringing trays of bottles and arranging them in the lower cabinets. She also brought an armful of plastic packets and began to fill them with liquid.

Azula watched it all, dumbfounded. With every bit of the room they brought into order, something inside of her shifted out of place, bringing the tower of her patience closer and closer to collapsing.
Where was her father? Where was the Avatar?

Where was anyone?

Her eyes followed the nurses as they gradually finished their jobs, dimming the ceiling lamp to plunge the room into an orange murk. Mira made a few final swipes with her washcloth and slinked away. Nira slid a round wooden table and chair into the corner by the window, then went to catch up with Mira. A ghostly Isla came to insert a needle into Azula’s left arm, hanging one of the plastic bags on the hook of a tall pole. Purple liquid began to drip into the tube. Finally, Kira approached and covered Azula with a blanket, pulling the covers up to her neck. The nurse's shadowy face spread into a smile. Right before she left, she paused by the door with her hand over the light switch.

"Sleep, darling."

Azula slept.

…

Her mind tossed and turned through darkness. She dreamed of her father’s airship fleet, taking off from the Royal Plaza into a reddening sky. Herself, standing on a tall observatory and watching, as the zeppelins sailed off into the distance where the sea met the horizon. She should have been with them. She should have gone with her father, but he had left her behind. And now, she was certain that something bad was going to happen.

Hours later, Azula woke up. The hospital room was utterly black, and from the space beneath the closed door, she saw that the hallway was too.

She lay still for a long time, staring up at the ceiling. After a while, she started to take deep breaths, trying to produce a flame, searching for even the smallest stir of heat inside of her. But nothing happened. She might as well have tried to strike a burnt-out match.

Giving a groan, Azula began to pull against the bands again, trying to twist herself into another position as best as she could. She intensified her efforts, and finally managed to heave herself over onto her right side, squashing her right arm beneath her. Her left one was clamped flat against her body, jutting out into the bands, making movement impossible. Azula was stuck looking at the counter, blinking in the darkness, where she could make out the outlines of the lower cabinets. She breathed a sigh.

Maybe her father really had recreated the world, and she was stuck in some residual fragment of the old one, sentenced to eternal purgatory. Was it punishment for her loss? She didn't think so. Ozai had no way of knowing about her duel with Zuko. It had to be something else. Some external force that was alien to them both. Azula thought of the waterbender girl who had been with Zuko, the one who had always traveled with her older brother and the Avatar. She and Zuko had both come on the Avatar's sky bison. That had to mean that the Avatar was somewhere else, possibly fulfilling a second half of a divide-and-conquer strategy.

And that could only mean one thing. If Zuko had gone after her, then the Avatar had to have gone after her father.

Azula blinked a few more times, feeling shock settle in.

Perhaps that was why it was taking so long. Perhaps the battle was already happening, some ten thousand feet above the ground, the Avatar's four elements against her father's solitary mastery. Technically, there was no reason for her father to lose - after all, he had twelve airships full of
firebenders backing him up. But some part of her knew that he wouldn't have let them help. If the Avatar confronted him, Ozai would make sure it was a one-on-one match.

Azula shifted her gaze back to the edge of the mattress, feeling a wave of resolve rise up within her. She had faced the Avatar dozens of times. Granted, his bending had improved after each encounter, but even so, a good part of his victories had still been the result of luck. And Ozai was the most powerful person she knew. If there was anyone who could finally put the Avatar in his place, it was him.

It had to be.

What felt like an eternity later, Azula woke up and saw a stripe of light from the crack beneath the door. Minutes later, she heard the sound of hushed footsteps and whispers from the hallway, then the door to her room creaked open.

"Ssh. Come quietly."

The light flickered on to its dimmest setting, revealing the shadowy figures of the three nurses. One of them approached and nudged Azula's shoulder. It was Kira.

"Honey. Are you awake?"

Azula flinched away, and Kira smiled. "Great! We'll turn the lights on, okay?"

Nira slid up the adjustor, and the light went on to full brightness. Kira lifted the blanket away and unstrapped the upper half of Azula's body, allowing her to sit up. At the same time, Mira approached from the right, pushing a strange wheeled chair up to the bed. The contraption was made mostly of metal, with a cushioned seat, armrests, footrests, and two giant rubber wheels on the sides. It also had a strap system of its own, with several thin, black bands for the legs, arms, torso, and neck.

"We'll have you sit here while I make your bed," Kira said. "Isla's going to test your blood again."

She fiddled with some locks on the bottom side of Azula's bed, and one by one, unclasped the straps the held her down. She lifted Azula up from the bed, supporting her beneath the back and knees, and lowered her down into a seated position into the wheelchair. Almost immediately, Mira began to put on the chair's straps, withholding only the arms and the one for Azula's neck. When she was done, she tied a white elastic band around Azula's right arm and felt around for another vein. Finding one, she stuck the needle in and drew a bit of blood.

In the meantime, Isla walked in with a microscope in her arms and set it onto the counter by the sink. She unlocked an overhead cabinet and took out a large mixing bowl, along with several bottles.

Once Mira had gotten the blood and cleaned up the wound, she approached Azula with a comb and began to brush her hair. She tugged through the tangles that had built up over the days and managed to return Azula's hair some of its former sheen. But she couldn't get rid of the jagged fringe, the remnant of the self-haircut Azula had done before the coronation. Mira looked at it in unease, but was forced to let it hang in front of Azula's eyes, partially neat, partially chaotic.

Mira was about to step away, but before she could, Azula reached out and clasped the nurse's wrist.

"This is your last chance," she said. "Tell me where I am and how I got here, or I'll end you."

"No, sweetie, this is your last chance." Mira smiled. "Let go of me, or I'll sedate you!"
Azula lowered her chin and returned the expression. "Try me."

In a sudden motion, Azula yanked Mira forward and butted her head into her stomach, sending the nurse stumbling back. Mira grabbed onto the counter before she could fall, her arm toppling several of Isla's bottles before finally gaining a grip.

Isla dropped her pestle and rushed to sweep the bottles out of the way. "No bumping!"

Mira, who had ended up in a partial squat, primly rose to her full height. Still with her eyes on Azula, she opened one of the nearby drawers and took out a syringe of clear liquid. She put her thumb on the back end, and for a moment, she and Azula looked at each other silently.

Azula began to fumble with the clasps of the leg straps, but couldn't figure out how to unlock them. Sitting up, she grabbed the side wheels of her chair and tried to turn herself away from the counter, but succeeded only in moving forward a few inches. Mira stepped to the side a little, still holding the syringe, but before either of them could make another move, Kira stepped between them.

"All right, that's enough. This is no way to start a new day. Let's just calm down and get on with things. We might even be able to see the doctor soon."

Mira looked at Azula through narrowed eyes, but put the syringe down. Azula smiled.

Kira knelt down beside the wheelchair and began to undo the clasps. "All right. Now we're going to have you change into some new clothes." She turned her head towards Nira, who closed one of the overhead cabinets and came forward with a red garment in her hands. She unfolded it to reveal a jumpsuit, with short sleeves and long pants, and placed a pair of brown shoes onto the floor.

"Cute, aren't they?" said Nira. "And we had everything custom-made, so you won't have to worry about the fit."

Kira removed the rest of the leg straps and lifted Azula to her feet. Immediately, Azula pushed Kira away and dove behind the wheelchair, grasping it by the back handles. She kicked it forward while Kira was still staggering for balance, but the nurse managed to push it away, accidentally sending it rolling in Isla's direction. The chair bumped into Isla's leg, and she teetered over the counter. "Watch out!"

Azula spun around towards the bed and jumped onto it, gripping the bars to swing her legs over to the other side. Nira and Kira raced after her, while Mira hung back, picking up the syringe. In a matter of seconds, Azula reached the shuttered wall, and as Kira drew close, she swung out her leg and kicked the nurse in the chest. But right then, Nira's hand knocked into Azula's back, causing her fall to her hands and knees. Before Azula could get up, Nira grabbed her arms and pulled them behind her back. Mira rushed over with the syringe, but Kira held up an arm to block her.

"No, don't!"

Mira pushed Kira's hand away. "Don't tell me what to do! Move!" She started to move towards Azula, but Kira pulled her back.

"I said, no!" Kira repeated. "Tranquilizer is for emergencies only!"

"And this isn't one?"

Kira sighed, but this time her face noticeably flushed. "No, Mira, believe it or not, it isn't. Maybe you didn't get the message, but we're here to heal her, not-"
But she was cut off at that moment by Azula's loud yell, as she broke away from Nira and lunged at them both. Azula got down on the floor and swung her legs out in an arc, kicking Mira's feet out from beneath her. The nurse fell, the syringe clattering to the floor, and Azula snatched it up.

Gasping, Mira scrambled away towards the shelves, grabbing a tray to shield herself. Nira and Kira froze. Over by the opposite wall, Isla wrapped her arms around her equipment and retreated farther into the corner.

Slowly, Azula began to back away towards the window, holding the syringe out in front of her like a dagger. Nira and Kira approached tentatively, unsure how to best proceed. Finally, Kira made a rapid lunge and snatched the syringe from Azula's hand. She grabbed onto Azula's wrist, and at the same time, Nira grabbed both of Azula's legs and lifted them from the ground, stretching Azula horizontally out between them.

Azula lunged towards Kira, punching the nurse with her free arm, causing her to fling the syringe away instinctively.

There was a loud clatter as the syringe fell onto the counter, and Isla whirled around, slapping her knee. "Are you all insane?"

"No!" Mira pushed herself closer against the cabinets and pointed to Azula. "She is!"

Nira gasped. "Mira!"

But while Nira's head was turned, Azula kicked her feet from the woman's grip and sank to the floor. Then she jerked her other arm free from Kira, but before Azula could stumble away, Kira caught her again and linked both of her hands behind her back. At the same time, Nira slid over on her knees and wrapped her arms around Azula's legs, locking them together in a standing position.

Mira approached with a fresh syringe in hand, smiling. "You want to know why you're here, sweetie? Do you really want to know?"

Azula gritted her teeth and knocked her head back as hard as she could, hitting it into Kira's. Kira's grip loosened, and Azula tore her arms free, grabbing Mira by the hair and shoving her away. As Mira fell back, Azula grabbed the syringe from her hand and jabbed it into Nira's shoulder. Nira flinched away with a yelp and began to wipe away the puddle of tranquilizer that had leaked out from the needle. Behind her, Mira dove back for the open drawer and began to fumble around for another syringe.

From the other side of the room, Isla turned on them. "If you three don't cut it out, I'm going to spray this whole room with sedative!"

But no one listened. Kira rushed towards Azula from behind, and Azula spun around to meet her, delivering a flying kick to her head. As Kira swiveled to the side, Azula bent her knees and sprang into a backwards arc, her body bending in the air as she touched off the floor with her hands and landed on her feet. When she straightened, Azula spun around and swept her leg at Mira, who leaned out of the way and aimed a punch at Azula's head. Azula blocked the blow and retaliated with her own, and the two entered a rally of jabs and swipes.

From behind, Azula heard footsteps. "That's it." Isla appeared beside them with a spray bottle. Azula swung her fist at her, but Isla ducked away. Mira lunged forward to attack again, but Azula dove past her and slid to the floor, crawling up to the cabinets beneath the counter. Bating her breath, she flung open the doors and began to snatch the bottles from the shelves, flinging them behind her in every direction. Glass shattered off the floor and furniture, and the four nurses hopped around the
puddles, trying to shield themselves and catch the flying bottles at the same time.

Azula had just emptied the middle shelf when a pair of hands grabbed her waist and pulled her away. She turned around and saw Nira, who tried to lift her up, but Azula punched her and pushed her away. Mira and Kira's feet pounded over the floor as they rushed to surround Azula in a tide of sweeping skirts. Isla scampered away to shield her workstation. Azula tried to stand, but the three nurses closed around her before she could, piling their heads and arms on top of her and cornering her against the cabinets.

Azula took several breaths, squinting as she tried to see through the mess of legs, shoulders, and hair. They had squished her against the side of the counter, forcing her to sit down on the floor with her arms and legs folded up in front of her. Azula began to writhe around in place, trying to find an opening which she could squeeze herself through, but the nurses adjusted their positions every time, keeping her trapped. But finally, one of them took a slightly wider stance, opening up a large triangle of space near the floor. Azula lowered herself to her hands and knees and quickly crawled through, scrambling away towards the bed, and just as the three nurses turned around in search of her, she whirled around to face them and lunged off the ground with her foot. She gave them the most forceful push she could muster, ramming Nira into Mira into Kira, who fell against each other like dominos, finally crashing with the full force of their momentum into Isla.

There was a peal of breaking glass as Isla fell face-first into her test-tube set, breaking through the rickety metal frame and collapsing with it over the counter. The mixing bowl toppled and slid upturned on her head, spilling herbs and blood all over her shoulders, which dribbled down her uniform as she slid to the floor. Then the bowl slipped off of her head and fell down, followed by several displaced bottles that rolled over the edge of the counter, falling beside her and shattering.

The other nurses froze on their feet and knees, gasping.

Isla sat motionless in the colorful mess for a while, drops of red, green, and blue dripping down her shirt. Her eyes pulled open, sticky from the mask of liquids splattered on her face, and blinked up at the ceiling for a few moments. Then her gaze went down, trailing across the room to find Azula. The girl was doubled over in an awkward fighting stance, arms spread out in the air.

Isla narrowed her eyes. "I think she's ready to see the doctor now."
One by one, the nurses rose to their feet. Nira and Kira went to Azula and bound her arms behind her back, forcibly lowering her down into the wheelchair. While they held her in place, Mira strapped her in, this time adding the bands that went around Azula's arms and neck. Isla left the room in the meantime to bring back a mop, and began to sweep away the broken glass.

Once the floor and counter were clean again, Kira opened a top cabinet and took out a long wooden box. She opened the lid, revealing a neat row of syringes, which contained more of the mysterious purple liquid. She dabbed the inner crease of Azula's elbow with disinfectant, then poked one of the needles into her vein, pressing on it with her thumb to push the liquid out. Moments later, Azula began to feel heavy, as if the strength were beginning to drain from her muscles. Within a minute she grew weak to such an extent that she had to droop her chin down to her chest.

The voices and motions around her became hazy. Long skirts and rapid feet shuffled in and out of the room, causing a constant buzz of noise that suddenly seemed loud and irritating. One of the nurses made the bed, while another went around with a wastebasket to clear the drawers of old needles and empty bottles. Over time, Azula noticed other faces appear apart from the original four, all of them dressed in the same white uniforms, exchanging rapid jargon.

At one point, someone took her wheelchair and rolled her into the empty space between the foot of the bed and the bookshelf, turning her to face the window. At the same time, another pair of hands pushed the round wooden table out from its place in the far corner and set it in front of her. It was followed moments later by the sole wooden chair.

Azula leaned her elbow on the table and put up a hand to support her head, but as time wore on, she unknowingly slouched over and became lost in the pattern of her place mat. She wanted to not exist, to disappear, to plunge through a hole in the ground and take as many of the idiot nurses with her as she could. She heard clinks and shuffles as they continued to rush around nearby, like roaches. But she didn't look up, not until she heard the door open, and a male voice enter the verbal exchange.

Azula lifted her head and blinked. There was a series of heavy, unfamiliar footfalls, then seconds later, two feet in boots stepped over to the chair, and a large, maroon-colored shape sat down in front of her.

She found herself looking at a middle-aged man dressed in a military uniform. He had brown hair worn in a typical Fire Nation style, with spiky sideburns and a topknot. He looked tired, but nevertheless, he smiled.

"Well, good morning to you."

Azula narrowed her eyes. Morning or evening, it wouldn't have made a difference. The lamplight was as white and stark as ever, and the window shutters were closed with an iron resolve, not letting even the slightest ray of light to slip through.

A nurse approached and placed two steaming cups of tea onto the table, one for Azula, and one for the man, who calmly took his and sipped from it. But before the nurse could leave, he pointed to Azula.

"Unstrap her, please."

Azula tensed her arms. The nurse unclasped the bands on her arms, neck, and stomach, and Azula,
thinking this would be her chance to break free, immediately reached for the edge of the table to
overturn it. But her arms moved like leaden blocks, and far from lifting the table up, she found she
could hardly tighten her grip around it. She couldn't do anything but hunch over her tea, and peer up
at the man through her jagged fringe of hair.

The man met her gaze in casual greeting. "I am Doctor Low. You must be Azula."

"Fire Lord Azula!"

"I prefer names," he said. "I find it gives my patients a chance to free themselves from mental
constructs and focus on defining who they are as individuals."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "Defining?"

"You are currently in a holistic rehabilitation facility. I am the head doctor. I spent twelve years on
the warfront as a healer, but here I also practice my other specialty, which is healing the mind."

Azula felt her heart thump faster. "So that's what this place is..." Her gaze darted across several
points in the room, from the cabinets to the curtains, and when she looked back at the doctor, she
kindled with rage. "But what do I have to be rehabilitated for? Who put me here? Tell me, and I'll
Teach them a lesson! I'll teach all of you a lesson you won't forget!"

Dr. Low took another drink from his teacup, then lowered it. "Listen carefully, Azula. I will tell you
everything that's happened and why you are here. The world as you know it has ceased to exist. The
war is over, and the Avatar has triumphed over Fire Lord Ozai. Fortunately your father only had time
to burn a few miles of uninhabited land, and his fleet of airships didn't reach any major Earth
Kingdom settlement. The Avatar's quick intervention spared many innocent lives."

Azula's eyes widened.

"Ozai was passing over the western shore of the Earth Kingdom when the Avatar confronted him.
They entered a one-on-one battle, which ended with Avatar Aang taking away Ozai's firebending.
Your father now resides in prison under careful watch, much like you, where he will spend the rest
of his life indebted to society. You have also been shown mercy, but even though you're not in jail,
your situation has changed drastically. You've been placed in a specialized facility that is equipped to
return you to a balanced state, both physical and emotional. You were brought here the day after the
new Fire Lord was crowned. He has provided for your safety and well-being here for as long as
needed, on the grounds that you take your treatment seriously. I am also officially obligated to inform
you that by Fire Nation law, you remain a lawful resident of the palace and retain your royal title, as
well as additional dignities accorded to you as the Fire Lord's sister."

Azula's heartbeat quickened further, and she felt herself keel over to the side. A nurse immediately
grabbed onto her arm, but Dr. Low waved it away.

"Let her be. She'll adapt in a few days."

The hand was withdrawn. Azula was left to set herself straight, gripping the edge of the table for
support. She glared at the doctor through narrowed eyes. "That's impossible. What about the armies?
We had soldiers all over the Earth Kingdom and in Ba Sing Se! You can't tell me Zuko just got rid of
them all!"

"They were ordered to desist, and are on their way home," said Dr. Low. "As for Ba Sing Se, that
city was freed by a guerilla army during the comet's passing. After his coronation Zuko ordered all
his remaining divisions to leave the city, and as we speak the Earth Kingdom government is
reassuming control over its territory."

Azula crinkled her nose. "And how do I know you're not lying? Perhaps I've been captured and you're feeding me false information to weaken my morale!"

"A valid point," the doctor replied. "Frankly, I hardly expected you to believe me the first time, so I brought along some evidence." He placed a large linen sack onto the table.

Azula looked at it without touching it. The doctor tapped a finger against the table. "Do you need a nurse to help you open it?"

Azula's face fell into a scowl. She swung her arm out and snatched the package by the strings, pulling it closer. The first thing she took out of it was a scroll, which she unrolled to reveal an ink sketch, stamped by the seal of a palace secretary. It depicted Zuko in royal robes, kneeling in front of the Fire Sages before a crowd of onlookers. The second item was an official poster from the Royal Palace, announcing the crowning of Fire Lord Zuko. The third object was Ozai's Phoenix King headpiece. It was the one he had put on right in front of her before he had departed with his airship fleet. The bronze plates had lost some of their luster and one of the bird's outspread wings was dented. But it was intact.

Azula turned the helmet over in her hands, too stunned to speak. The doctor inclined his head. "A group of workers picked that up when they were moving the fallen airships. They brought it back with them, probably for a celebration, but I made sure it was saved for you."

After a moment of thought, Azula lifted her gaze. "Hmm. Very persuasive… but I still don't quite feel like you're telling me the truth. If I really am in the Fire Nation like you say, then maybe you could take me to a proper window so I could see for myself. If they've just crowned a new Fire Lord, surely everyone would be celebrating."

Dr. Low gave a laugh. "Don't think I don't know where this is headed. I've raised five children. I know every trick under the sun."

Azula scowled. "I'm not a child! I am Princess Azula, the heir to the throne! Just a few weeks ago you'd have been on your knees before me!"

"And you would not have been hospitalized, nor would you have even guessed that you eventually would be, or that fate would place you under my care. But such is life. " The doctor took another sip of his tea.

"But I'm in perfect health!" Azula cried. "Your nurses said so themselves! All my bones are healed! So why am I still here?"

"Your body may be healed, but the general conjecture is that your true wounds lie within."

"The general conjecture?"

"Yes. Mine, my staff's, and your brother's."

Azula paused in puzzlement.

"After your Agni Kai match, Zuko said you lapsed into a state of delirium and began to cry uncontrollably. The Fire Sages were about to come untie you, but you broke the chains yourself and tried to run away. You ended up jumping from the roof of a building and falling almost thirty feet, then when the Fire Sages surrounded you, you made a wheel of fire. If they hadn't suppressed your flames, you would have cremated everything around you. Including yourself."
Azula blew a loose strand of hair away from her face. "Well, why didn't they let me? I'm their enemy, aren't I?"

The doctor's face remained grave. "Your brother does not believe you to be his enemy."

"So? We fought an Agni Kai! He gained the throne while I lost it, and therefore I would have honored his victory by eliminating myself! If he spared me, then he's a coward! Too proud to let himself lose, too weak to finish me off!"

"Your brother is far from weak. You, however, have a long road to recovery ahead of you."

Azula settled back with a grumble. She looked into the doctor's eyes, transmitting as much hatred and coldness through her stare as she could, but his face remained as calm and tired as before.

"Do you have anything to add?"

Azula did not reply.

"In that case, please put away the poison daggers and conserve your energy for something useful. Today and every day hereafter, you will follow a strict regimen consisting of physical therapy and psychological counseling. Meals will be provided three times a day with no exceptions. Be advised that this is not a resort. You are not on vacation; you are here to recover, and we intend on taking you through the course of healing we've planned for you. Whether it's a good or bad experience will be entirely up to you. But I can assure you, you will finish it one way or another." He rose. "I'll stop by every other day to check up on you, and will naturally be there if you should ever call. For now, you'll go with Nira."

Dr. Low lifted his hand, and the nurse reappeared at Azula's side to put the missing straps back into place. Once it was done, Nira grabbed the handles and pushed her out of the room.

Nira turned the wheelchair left, and they traveled down the barren gray hallway, passing several closed doors on either end, until they finally stopped before one that stood open, to Azula's left. Unlike her new bedroom, this room lacked the medical equipment and had some comforting touches — bookcases, potted plants, and a Fire Nation tapestry. Near the left wall was a large writing desk, where a woman sat working over a journal. She wore a long white smock, but the clothes underneath were black, signifying that she was a doctor. Her hair was tied back into a functional bun. Behind her, the shutters of her window were slightly open, letting in strips of daylight.

Nira rolled the wheelchair up to the desk, and the woman looked up. "Ah, good. Let's get her out, then."

She motioned to a long examination table that stood along the right wall, with its own set of straps that dangled from the side like tendrils. Nira began to undo the straps on Azula's wheelchair, and as soon as all of them were off, Azula shoved the nurse away and sprang out of the chair. Nira lunged after her, hugging Azula's arms to her sides and pulled her back. Azula fought against her grip, twisting from side to side, trying to use her ankle to knock Nira off-balance.

Their cries attracted a rush of footsteps from the hallway, and just as Azula began to succeed in elbowing Nira away, she found herself being overpowered by Mira, Kira, and two others, who grabbed at her arms and legs from various directions. Abandoning all form, Azula began to smack and kick blindly at her surroundings, which actually managed to keep the nurses at bay for a while, before the therapist stepped in and captured her wrists. She clamped Azula's arms to her sides, and with the help of Nira, managed to lay Azula down on the examination table and hook the straps about her body.
Once Azula lay writhing and groaning on her back, the therapist looked down at her and sighed. "You're going to be a tough one, aren't you?"

She reached out to accept a tray of equipment from Nira and rolled a chair over to Azula's side. The therapist shone a small flashlight into Azula's eyes, then opened Azula's mouth to check her tongue. Azula tried to breathe fire again, but once again nothing came out. Furious she began to breathe harder, pushing out the air till she was practically wheezing. The therapist waited patiently for her to finish, and when Azula had exhausted herself, the woman shook her head with a smile.

"We're not as dumb as you think we are, girlie. That serum subdues your firebending completely. Just think of it as us taking a dangerous object out of your possession. You will have it back once you've shown enough progress that will warrant Dr. Low to believe you can wield it properly."

Azula sneered. "I can firebend better than any of you have ever dreamed."

The woman lifted her eyebrows. "A young prodigy? Yes, I can see the signs... Overly-abrasive gestures, obsession with perfection, ignorance of physical limits... Whoever taught you firebending clearly didn't teach you how to take care of the body you produce it with. Many of your muscles are overstretched and your joints overall are unstable, likely because you've been trying to push yourself beyond your natural level of flexibility. You were lucky you didn't dislocate or break anything up until now, what with all the fighting you've been doing. It seems that your training routine at least partially focused on building up your resilience, so I'll admit, things aren't as bad as I thought they were. But even so, your body needs rest. Physical therapy will teach you techniques for relaxation, as well as the proper way to train without injuring yourself. Now I am going to unstrap you and we will begin your preliminary examination."

Nira unclipped the straps, and Azula found that she was once again too weak to lash out. After her brief moment of physical exertion, her body felt even heavier than before. Nira hoisted Azula to her feet without a struggle, like setting a statue upright, while the therapist went to her desk for a clipboard and pen.

The hour passed by in a blur. Azula was prodded and poked, bent and turned, weighed and measured. Each time she tried to pull away, Nira or the therapist would catch her and force her back onto a scale, or beneath a tape measure, or back into an asana. The therapist made Azula go through a series of poses from simple to hard, measuring the angles she could lift each leg in the air and testing the rotation of her shoulders.

Nira stood at Azula's side while she did the asanas, supporting her and making adjustments, while the therapist surveyed her with a calculating frown, scribbling notes and numbers onto her paper. Unlike everybody who had admired and praised Azula's acrobat-like abilities in the past, the therapist did not seem particularly impressed with the way Azula could twist herself into knots on the floor or hold her entire body aloft with a single hand.

Finally, Azula did a handstand scorpion, which was one of the moves she had always prided herself on most, standing on her hands and bending her legs in the air so that her feet rested on the top of her head. The therapist's eyes widened in surprise, but it was less of the awed kind and more of the concerned kind.

After the check-up was over, Azula was strapped back into the wheelchair and rolled on through the hallway. She spun her head around in different directions, glimpsing door after door, all of them opening and closing as nurses rushed back and forth, carrying boxes, towels, and hospital tools. The doors were unevenly spaced, which gave the impression that some rooms were much larger than others, though Azula could never catch a proper glimpse inside of them. Looking behind her, she saw the hallway end in the far distance at a single door, where no one came in or out. Up ahead was
the same thing, another dead end, a few doors down from her room. She was quite literally boxed in.

Nira stopped the chair every once in a while to chat with a passing nurse or put on a serious face and exchange serious-sounding information. All the while, Azula sat back in silence, watching everything with a frozen expression of uncertainty.

She had never heard of psychological healing. Sure, she had a concept of mental instability, and had even heard people bring it up, often in conjunction with her grandfather, Azulon. But there were no hard-and-fast theories about what that term really meant. Any medical field that didn't have the funding of the Imperial Medical Society was doomed to consist of a few scattered practitioners in shady parts of town, and was usually associated with spiritualism and quackery, which were definitely not things that were commonly discussed by the nobles. Very rarely did she hear stories of people who were sent off somewhere, specifically to heal something wrong with their minds. Heal a battle injury, yes. Recover from a stressful campaign, yes. But heal a mental illness? The concept was utterly alien to her.

Azula fixed her gaze on the faraway door and gritted her teeth. Where are you, Father?

Moments later, she felt Nira take the handles of the wheelchair again and push her on. Azula was bought back to her bedroom and wheeled up to the round wooden table, where Kira was seated with a scroll and ink pen.

"All right. We're going to examine some scenarios," she said. "I'll read you the situation and you tell me how you would respond." She smiled at Azula. "Ready? Let's start!"

Azula glanced over to the clock on the counter. It was half past noon.

"Let's say you're walking down the street and see a sack of money on the ground," Kira began. "You don't know who it belongs to, and no one else notices it…"

Option one, option two, option three. Azula made her decision without putting too much care into it, and Kira wrote it down. Then she moved on to the next one, telling another small story then reciting another list of actions. The clock ticked through the minutes. Pretty soon, the minutes became hours. Nurses came in and out, and Azula frequently shifted her gaze towards them, lingering on their focused faces and purposeful motions.

After thirty or so moral conundrums, Kira finally rolled up the scroll, but instead of leaving, she went to the bookshelf and brought back another one. Now she began to recite puzzles. They ranged from children's riddles to complex mind games, involving logic, numbers, and language. At first, Azula tried to draw out her pauses before answers for as long as possible, to waste as much time thinking as she could, but when that tactic failed, she switched to blurtting things out as rapidly as possible, hoping to exhaust Kira's supply of questions. But midway, Kira set the scroll down with a sigh.

"Azula, you're not giving this enough thought," she said. "Here. I'll read it again, and you just think one more time about it."

Azula gritted her teeth. "No!"

"Azula, this isn't an option. I won't move on to the next one until you give me a good answer."

Azula clenched her teeth harder, curling her hands into fists. She began to growl and retaliate, but everything she said was instantly dissipated by a kind smile or patient sigh. Azula's gaze began to grow blank, and the motions of the white-clothed nurses around her seemed to grow more rapid and rhythmic, almost as if they were dancing, spinning around her a web that would ensnare her
Azula's breathing grew rapid. She looked down at the latest card Kira had set down before her, some kind of shape-matching puzzle, and in a burst of rage, she tore the entire deck from the nurse's hands and threw the cards in her face. "Go away!" Azula screamed. "All of you!"

Kira's smile froze and her mouth fell agape. With all the strength she had, Azula pushed her wheelchair away from the table and bumped back against the counter, then turned around and began to fling away every object within her reach - pens, scroll tubes, bottles. The nurses ducked and scampered around, trying to catch the flying objects. Finally, Kira pulled Azula away from the counter and rolled her towards the bed.

"All right, all right, I understand! You're tired. Let's have a rest." She leaned down to Azula, who had grabbed the sides of her head, twisting her fingers through the mass of wiry dark hair. Her breath began to shake, and with a final, feeble snap, Azula's composure broke and she began to wail. Her voice rose up above those of the other nurse's, and she let her chin droop, tears rushing down her face.

Through the blur, she saw Kira back away and usher the other nurses out of the room. "Give her some space, girls. Quickly."

The nurses left, and Azula continued to cry, slamming her hands to her face and succumbing to the quakes of her gasps. She didn't even notice it when they left her alone. She looked at the Phoenix King helmet on top of the bookshelf, at the red blankets and golden articles that were scattered around the white wasteland, and wailed. In hatred, in anger, in helplessness.

Time passed, blurred behind the rush of her tears, then after a while the bitter river once again ran dry. Azula felt her breathing return to normal, though now she had a stuffy nose and a throbbing headache. She sat in silence for a while, then gradually regained enough of her calm to look up and brush her hair away from her face. She turned to look at the clock on the shelf. It was eight in the evening.

Minutes later, the door opened, and Kira silently walked in to place a tray of dinner onto Azula's lap. Azula accepted it without a word or move of the head, and once the nurse was gone, she took the chopsticks and began to eat. The food consisted of rice, vegetables, and meat, all of which tasted unusually bland, but was edible. Once she was done, Azula was left staring down at the empty bowl, dully tapping her fingers against the metal tray. She looked up to the iron shutters on the opposite wall. Kira had drawn the curtains over them, as her way of marking the evening, but Azula could still see the steel peeking out from the bottom hem.

Visited by curiosity, she set the tray onto the counter and pushed on the wheels of her chair, rolling herself over to the window. Azula leaned as far forward as her waistband would allow, drawing her nose up to the narrow crack between the steel board and the wall. She couldn't see anything in that tiny slip of darkness, and all she could hear was the faint sound of rushing wind.

Great. Perfect.

Azula turned around sourly and rolled herself back towards the bed.

Part of her still didn't want to believe Dr. Low's words, but another part of her, however small or reluctant, knew that they were true. She didn't even need his souvenir bag to prove it. There had just been something about that day… something in the dim, red glow of the comet-stricken sky that had signaled a dying world. Even the royal palace, for all its former splendor, seemed to have decayed during the brief time she had occupied it.
Yes, it had been the day of her coronation. But there had been something dreadfully wrong about it - something dreadfully wrong with her - that she had been trying to pinpoint that whole day, but couldn't.

It hadn't been that lady with the cherry bowl. Azula had found that out a few minutes after banishing her, leaving a bowl of cherries on the floor that she couldn't eat, because she couldn't reach. To be sure, that woman's actions could've had morbid consequences given a malicious intent. In fact, any of her servants could have easily taken her down due to their sheer daily proximity to her, so having one fewer of them would do her no harm. But even with that lady gone, Azula's uneasiness hadn't been.

It hadn't been the Dai Li either. Though for a minute there, too, she had thought she'd pinned it. Her elite, prized warriors, whom she had fought for and won in Ba Sing Se, had practically been treated like royal guards during their time in the Fire Nation, even earning recognition from her father. But they were traitors too, for they had betrayed Long Feng, hadn't they? All it would take was for someone more eloquent than her to give them a better offer, and they'd turn against her the same way.

But banishing them hadn't make her feel any better. Her restlessness only grew, and the more people she shunned from her presence, it felt like she wasn't getting any closer to eliminating the problem, but rather cutting away its extraneous parts, which made the real source stand out in greater prominence. The palace had just been so quiet, and the emptier it got, the quieter it became, and soon Azula felt as if a presence had been lurking somewhere inside of it, hiding in the shadows. Whispering to her.

She had been alone.

All alone.

And somehow, listening to that silence, Azula had known it was her day to fall.

In the past, she had always been able to stifle the tiny, anxious speculations that occasionally arose in her mind: What if my strategic brilliance vanished this very moment but I still had to act like I knew what I was doing? What if I suddenly forgot how to do a flame-wheel in battle and became unable to fight?

Early on, she had treated these musings as entertainment, and could detach herself from them simply by remembering that they could never correspond to reality. But soon, her fantasized scenarios escalated to dangerous situations: What if the Boiling Rock workers cut the line this very moment and my gondola fell into the water? (Never mind, there's another one on the way, I can still go on as planned.) What if I'm losing control of my friends? (She drew her arms back to shoot lightning at Mai, just as the other girl took out a razor blade, her resoluteness for the first time directed against Azula.) What if I can't save myself from falling this time? (She pulled out her hair clip as a last resort and dug it into the wall of the cliff, fighting to keep her hold.)

What if, this time, Zuko's stronger?

(His burst of fire came inches away from her face, the red flare reflected in her eyes, before she snapped to her senses and propelled herself away. Using her own blue flames, flimsy and faltering.)

But at last, one of those scenarios had come true. Zuko was strong, and she was weak. He had come to take his proper place above her, riding the pet of his best friend, with another friend at his side, ready to assist. And now, in the back of her mind, Azula felt strangely envious of the Katara girl for the fact that he had been defending her.
But why? a louder part of her screamed. Why was I so weak?

Azula pressed her hands to the sides of her head, focusing her gaze on the floor. It didn't matter. She couldn't slip up again. She had to get back in form before someone found a hole in her defense. She was the princess. She was the Fire Lord. She was the one who would carry victory.

But no matter how hard she repeated those mantras to herself, the words felt weak and lifeless. Some old part of her mind was crippled, and the best she could do now was brace herself for a few seconds before her focus slipped from her grasp. It was as if a faucet had been turned on in her brain, and was leaking out something she had kept pent up before.

Her power. Her control.

It was streaming away like a river.

Azula sat in place for what felt like forever, listening to her breath, feeling it rise and fall. She glanced over to the bed again, which stood there like an alien contraption, so unlike everything she was used to. Her gaze ran over the straps attached to the mattress, at the metal legs to which the wheels were attached, and she felt a morbid dread mixed with disgust wash over her.

Perhaps, in a way, she really was sick. She was tired and burnt-out, but also, on the inside, shifted. Shifted to some strange new mode, just like the bed, and the nurses, and the room. Shifted the minute Zuko's fire-blast had knocked her off her feet and thrown her across the floor of the arena. Shifted the minute she had looked into the mirror and seen her mother standing behind her.

But what had happened? Why had Ursa come?

Azula thought it over and over, but couldn't get an answer. She pondered the expressions she had seen on Ursa's face, on her tone of voice, and was met again with the strange flood of emotions that had risen so suddenly inside of her at that moment. But now, as she pondered those feelings, something else arose from them. She began to see images of sunlight again, of a green field, with lots of hills and long, swaying grass, like snippets of something that might have once formed a coherent whole. And at last, the memory snapped together. She had been in a meadow. She had woken up there right after her Agni Kai match, finding herself sitting by a pond, with a young boy who called himself Quin the Quester. He had been funny and familiar. But the strangest part was, she had been happy there. For the first time in her life, she had felt utterly at peace, completely relieved of everything her mind had been burdened with. Something about the grass and the sky had seemed to soak it all up, leaving her a clean slate. Just like it had done for the boy.

Azula smiled faintly as she thought of him now. He was probably still there, reclining in the grass, waiting for the old man to appear from behind the hill. How easy it would have been for her to stay with him, to sit by the pond forever instead of going into that plaza. But now, she knew it had been meant that way. She had been destined to visit the boy's realm, then leave. For him, the meadow was home, but for her, it had just been a temporary haven.

And now, it was one she'd never see again.
When Azula woke up the next morning, she opened her eyes into darkness and felt her eyelashes brush against a piece of cloth. A scream rose up in her throat, but just as she jerked up to let it out, someone hastily untied a knot at the back of her head and pulled the blindfold off, revealing the brightly-lit bedroom. Nira's face appeared in front of her. "Oops! Sorry, honey. It's past ten in the morning, so we went ahead and turned on the lights. I decided to blindfold you so it wouldn't bother you."

Azula blinked her eyes. Mira stalked by at that moment, carrying a stack of freshly-laundered towels. "We should've just woken her up. She's already late for physical therapy." She placed the towels into a cabinet and left the room.

Nira unstrapped Azula from the bed and removed the IV tubes that were in her arms. Then she lifted Azula to her feet, handed her the red jumpsuit and shoes from the day before, and guided her out of the room by the arm. Kira met them in the hallway, and the two nurses steered Azula to the right, into a small bathroom with a mirror and sink. Nira closed the door, while Kira took the jumpsuit from Azula's hands and started to fold it out.

"All right, honey, let's get you dressed."

But Azula snatched the garment from the nurse's hands. "I can do it myself!" she snarled. "Now if you two lout-heads don't mind."

Nira nodded brightly. "Oh, of course! Come on, Kira, let's give her some space." She quickly stepped out of the bathroom and Kira followed suit. Just before the door closed behind them, Kira poked her head out. "We'll be right here if you need us, honey."

Azula gritted her teeth and pushed the door closed the rest of the way. Enjoying some semblance of imagined privacy, she began to change. The jumpsuit did fit her well, though the color reminded her a little of what the prisoners had worn at the Boiling Rock. Azula slipped on the shoes, grateful at least to be free from touching the cold floor with her bare feet, and left the room.

"I'm done," she announced, harshly biting out the words. Nira and Kira smiled at her.

"Great! Now let's have some breakfast." Kira took her by the arm again and steered her back into the bedroom. She sat Azula down into the wheelchair, ignoring the straps, and placed a tray of rice porridge and vegetables onto her lap. But before giving her the chopsticks, Kira brought forth a bottle of purple liquid and poured some out into a teaspoon. She brought the spoon to Azula's mouth and Azula flinched back.

"What is that?"

"This is the serum that suppresses your firebending," Kira said. "You'll have to take it every morning by spoon now. And don't try to wheedle out of it — either you take it yourself orally, or we start injecting it intravenously again and keep you in straps all day."

Azula grumbled, but took the spoon from Kira and gulped down the liquid. It tasted absolutely like nothing, but the viscous, almost gelatinous texture nearly made her gag. In a matter of seconds after swallowing, Azula felt her pulse quicken, and the familiar, leaden heaviness settle into her limbs. Her heart thumped. "What is this? What are you doing to me?" She looked around at the nurses in alarm. "You're poisoning me!"
"We're not poisoning you," Kira said. "Lethargy is just a side effect. It'll go away in a couple hours, once your body gets accustomed to it. But look on the bright side — at least you have the freedom to move around."

Nira, who had begun to rummage through the bookshelf, looked over her shoulder and nodded. "Yeah, and you won't have to sleep with those annoying straps anymore either. Because we'll use this!" She turned all the way around and showed Azula a pair of handcuffs attached to a long chain. She unlocked them with a small key, and hooked one of the cuffs around the bar of the bed. "Don't worry, this doesn't mean you're our prisoner or anything. It's just a little reminder for you not to run off wild. And trust me, it'll beat having your lungs crushed every night! I actually asked Mira to put me in a bed like this once, just to see what it was like, and I was sore for hours. It was horrible! She did it a bit tight, though; we tried to keep yours as loose as possible, since—"

"Okay!" Kira lowered her arm on Azula's shoulder. "We'd love to chat with you, Nira, but we have to go. Dee's going to get impatient."

Nira nodded and waved. "All right, have fun!"

Kira wheeled Azula out into the hallway at that point, turning right. They coasted past the familiar rows of doors, and due to her more heightened degree of awareness this time, Azula noticed that there was a middle door as well, which would have divided the wing into two sections if it had been closed. She looked ahead at the distant section of the hallway, trying to glean as many of its details as she could, but she only had time to see the same rows of closed doors and dead end before she was turned and wheeled into the physical therapist's room. Dee awaited them behind her desk as before, and once Kira had parked the wheelchair, the therapist hoisted Azula to her feet and guided her towards a floor mat.

"Okay. We're going to start off with relaxation. I want you to lie down, make your body completely flat, and close your eyes. Focus on your breath."

"That should be easy, right?" Kira put in.

Azula gave her a death-glare. But Dee dimmed the lights moments later and sat back behind her desk. "Come on. Let's get started."

Azula lowered herself onto the mat, feeling the leaden weight of her own body pulling her down. Kira did not leave the room, but closed the door and settled into the chair in front of Dee's desk. She crossed her legs and gave a sigh.

"Mm. This should be relaxing!"

"No talking, please," said Dee. "And I want eyes closed," she said to Azula.

Azula grumbled and closed her eyes.

For a minute or so, she focused on her breaths, but over time her attention shifted further inward to check in with the heaviness. The sensation, which had started out in her muscles, had spread itself out through her entire body and was beginning to thin out. Azula found it slightly easier to move when she discreetly lifted her arms from the ground. But the serum hadn't deactivated - rather, it seemed to have progressed somewhere deeper, and was now slowing down some smooth, continuous flowing of energy inside of her. Hazarding a guess at what was happening, Azula tried to make fire from her hands. The current stirred with a sluggish hum, as if some internal motor were trying to rev itself up, sending some slow, tangible signals to her palms. But the exhaustion rushed back in a matter of seconds and she was forced to stop. Azula could hardly believe it. She was
feeling the flow of her chi. The serum was slowing it down to a crawl, but almost as if in compensation, the flow was becoming more and more noticeable to her. For a while, Azula simply lay there, paying attention to it.

A clock ticked away on Dee's desk, and for a long time, the only other noise was the rustle of paper. Azula gradually grew bored and began to daydream, then dozed off and began to dream for real, before suddenly jerking awake, her heart hammering in brief panic. She cracked open an eye. Kira seemed to have fallen asleep, and Dee was still working beneath a shaded desk lamp. Azula lowered her head again. She quietly went through a few more cycles of dozing and wakening, before Dee finally squinted at her table clock and stood up. "All right, that's enough for today. You can get up now. But take it slowly; you might feel dizzy."

Azula rolled herself over onto her side and pushed herself up. She did feel slightly dizzy, but as she stood up, it faded, and she found that she felt a bit more like the earlier-morning version of herself. Kira sat her down into the wheelchair again, thankfully forgoing the straps, and wheeled her out of the room. But instead of taking her back to the bedroom, she turned to the right again, and pushed open a door on the other side of the hallway. This room had the size and furnishings of a classroom, with a large wooden desk in front of a blackboard, some bookshelves, and another plain table in the back. But there was only one writing desk in the center. Kira parked Azula's wheelchair behind it, right next to a group of potted plants along the wall.

Azula scowled. "And what's this supposed to be, gardening class?"

"No. This is where you'll have mind therapy." Kira closed the door and went to the bookshelf near the desk, where she began to look through the folders and boxes. "Dr. Low has recommended that you start slowly, by doing activities that will calm you throughout the day. Even I find that when I'm stressed, it's nice to retreat to a hobby or craft I like to do to help me relax. What kinds of things are you interested in, Azula?"

Azula didn't answer.

Kira opened a box of paper. "Do you like to draw?"

Azula kept silent.

"Or perhaps paint?"

Azula looked away.

Kira sighed. "Maybe this will help. What did you spend most of your time doing on a daily basis when you lived in the palace?"

"I never had time for stupid childish games," Azula snapped. "I was too busy preparing to rule the country!"

"And what kinds of hobbies did you occupy yourself with while you were doing that?" Kira continued. "Did you stitch, perhaps?"

"I firebended! I trained with the best tutors in the Fire Nation!"

"Writing? Collecting?"

"Helping plan strategies for the military!"

"Reading?"
"Walking by ranks of soldiers and if their stances were off by the slightest margin, I had the authority to take them out of line and punish them!"

Kira paused, looking down at Azula with pursed lips. Azula smirked back.

Kira sighed. She pulled up a stool and sat down across from Azula's desk, folding her hands in her lap. "All right. So, from what I can tell, you spent most of your time preparing yourself for a life of official duty. There's nothing wrong with that. But that's not all what life is about, right? No matter how demanding your schedule is, you have to make time for yourself. So that's what we're going to do here. Make time for ourselves."

Azula rolled her eyes.

Kira got some paper and a pencil from the shelves and scooted her chair closer to Azula. "All right. We're going to play one of my favorite games. It goes like this: I name an object, and you draw it. Do it however you want. No constraints whatsoever." She placed the paper and pencil in front of Azula and tapped her chin. "Let's see. Draw me a… tree."

Azula just stared at the nurse as if she were a moron, but after a few seconds she realized that Kira was actually serious and wouldn't leave her alone until she got a response. With a frustrated sigh, Azula grabbed the pencil and drew a box-like trunk with reedy branches. She pushed the drawing at Kira.

"Good job!" The nurse smiled and flipped the paper over. "All right, your turn. What do you want me to draw?"

"A map of where we are."

Kira smiled wryly. "That was clever, honey, but it won't fly. I need a concrete object."

Azula crossed her arms. "A statement of my release, then."

Kira pursed her lips. "All right. I'll think of something myself. You tell me what it looks like when I'm done."

She bent over the paper and began to draw. Azula crossed her arms and looked at the blank blackboard.

Right then, the door opened. Azula's eyes immediately flew over to it, and she nearly did a double-take when she saw Dr. Low step into the room. He was holding a clipboard and pen. Kira looked up at him, but he waved for her to continue, and went to sit down at the back table. The doctor placed the clipboard into his lap and began to write something down, his military uniform a splotch of maroon against the bleak wall. He might as well have just come from the palace.

Azula narrowed her eyes at him. "What are you doing here?"

Dr. Low looked up at her, but instead of responding he lowered his gaze to the clipboard again.

"All done!" Kira held up the paper, showing a picture of a basket. "What is this?"

Azula kept her gaze fixed on Dr. Low, who was still looking at his clipboard. She gripped the handles of her wheelchair. "What are you writing? I didn't even do anything, and you're analyzing me already?"

Kira reached for Azula's shoulder. "Come on, honey, focus. The doctor's just here to see how things
are going."

"No!" Azula swatted Kira's hand away and looked back at Dr. Low. "I know what you're doing. You're recording my answers so you'll know how to crack me!"

Dr. Low looked up at her again.

"Well it's not going to work!" Azula said. "Because I'm not going to say anything! Not to your stupid nurses, and especially not to you!"

"Azula, please. Concentrate." Kira held up the drawing. "If this doesn't interest you, all you have to do is tell me and we'll do something else."

Azula continued to glare at Dr. Low, seething with anger. The doctor held her gaze, then almost casually dropped it back to the clipboard. Azula dug her nails into the pad of the armrests.

From behind, she heard Kira put the paper down. "Fine. We'll do something else." She scooped up the supplies and went back behind the desk. She searched around the shelves for a bit, then returned with a deck of cards. "This one's a classic. I'm going to show you some pictures, and you're going to say the first word that pops into your head when you see them."

Kira sat down and flipped the first card. The picture was of a random black splotch.

Azula drew back in revulsion. "What?"

"All right. Next!" Kira flipped the card, showing a similar splotch with smeared edges.

Azula snarled. "This is stupid!"

"Say a word, honey. Any word."

"Butterfly-worm!" Azula blurted.

"All right!" Kira flipped the next card. "How about this?"

Azula blinked. "Black!"

Flip.

"And this?"

"Dagger!"

Flip.

"And this?" Kira brought out another card, and for the strangest reason, an image immediately flashed in Azula's mind, making a connection almost too rapid for her to realize. Her mouth opened of its own accord. "Mai—"

But the minute she realized what she was saying, Azula stopped and closed her mouth. She stole a glance at Dr. Low, who paused in his writing moments later and looked up. Azula narrowed her eyes and turned away. "Ink."

Kira lowered the cards. "It seemed like you were about to say May, the fifth month. That's a pretty time of year; does it mean anything special to you?"
Azula slapped the table. "I said this is stupid!"
Kira sighed. "Fine. I'll get another game." She went back to the shelves and put the cards away.
Azula watched the nurse rummage around, and snorted. "Games. Is that really how you heal your patients?"
"Of course," Kira replied. "Relaxation is essential for successful therapy."
"Perhaps I'm not in a hospital at all, and you're just keeping me here to do something with me."
"If by 'do something' you mean heal you, then yes," Kira said. "That's what hospitals are for."
Azula crossed her arms. "What kind of hospital keeps its windows boarded up?"
"The kind that doesn't want its patients to get distracted."
"So you do the same thing for everyone else?"
"Of course."
Azula frowned. "And how many patients are there?"
Kira looked up at the ceiling. "I'm not sure. I don't know the exact number, of course, but there are dozens. And everyone's treated the same."
"And will I get to see any of them?"
"Don't be silly. Your treatment is yours and yours alone. Nobody else should be involved with the process."
"But what if I'm the kind who needs company?"
She heard a chuckle, and whipped her head around to see Dr. Low smiling to himself. He looked up at them for a moment, but lowered his gaze to the clipboard before Azula could look him in the eye.
Moments later, Kira came back to the table. "That's enough," she said flatly. She set down a scroll in front of her. It was filled with mathematics problems. "Solve these. You have one hour. No talking."
Azula narrowed her eyes. But she took the pencil and slid her chair closer to the desk, sitting primly and perfectly, just as she had done in school. Periodically, she looked up at Kira, who nodded for her to keep going. From the side, Dr. Low didn't make another sound. And yet, he was the one who seemed to be getting exactly what he wanted. The more Azula paid attention to him in the corner of her eye, the more prominent he seemed, like a giant dark spider in web of white skirts and smiles that had ensnared her.

At the end of the day, Kira wheeled Azula back to her room and left her alone for what she called "mindfulness hour". For once, the activity was appropriate. Azula was indeed mindful, and by the end of the session, she had formed a plan of action. She would get out. She would be free.
When the door opened again, it was Mira carrying a tray of dinner. The nurse tried to act cool when she handed it to Azula, but couldn't resist a wayward, calculating glance before she turned away. Azula immediately caught Mira's gaze, compelling the nurse to keep looking at her, and smiled.
"So. Is this what it's going to be like every day?"

"I don't know what you mean." Mira started to walk away, and Azula leaned forward in her chair.

"I mean, aren't you going to do anything else? Or take me anywhere else?"

Mira stopped in the doorway and turned around, placing a hand on her hip. "Freedom is a privilege. You haven't earned it." With that, she away primly and closed the door.

Azula ate her food in silence. When she was done, she rolled her chair to the counter and put down the tray. Then, she scooted herself behind her bed, peering down at the tangle of wires that fastened it to the wall. During her earlier investigation, she had found that all of them were just simple hooks, which were attached to a metal ring on the wall and kept closed by twist fasteners. Azula bent down and untwisted one of them, which caused the hook to open effortlessly, and let it hang on the ring. She did this for several others, but let the rest be, just in case one of the nurses noticed. Smiling in satisfaction, she sat back down in the wheelchair.

Kira came in a minute later to prepare Azula for bed. She pulled aside the blanket and lowered her down, closing the handcuff around her wrist. "Sleep tight." She smiled, placed the key deep into the bookshelf, and went to turn off the lights. Moments later, the door closed behind her.

As always, she didn't lock it.

Azula waited for a couple of minutes, then crawled up to the front of the bed and felt around for the hooks. She managed to untwist the rest of them, detaching them from the wall and letting them hang loosely from the bottom of the bed. Then she sat up on her knees and pushed off from the wall. The bed rolled smoothly along the floor and stopped at the bookcase with a quiet bump. Azula leaned towards the shelf and searched it with both hands, feeling around for the little silver key. When she found it, she let out a grateful breath and began to pick at the lock until the handcuff popped open. She lowered her feet onto the floor and rolled the bed back into place. Then she reached for the doorknob and pressed her ear against the door. When she didn't hear any sounds coming from the hallway, she opened it.

The hallway was as dark as ever, but a little to her right, there was a slip of light coming from beneath a door on the opposite wall. The light wasn't much, but with her dark-adjusted eyes, Azula could see the outlines of the other doorways around her. She went left, approaching the dividing door, and to her surprise, found that it was closed and locked. Azula went back, carefully tiptoeing past the occupied room, where she could hear the voices of Nira, Mira, and Kira chatting away. She pressed her palms against the dead-end door and tried that knob as well, but it was firmly locked. She breathed a sigh.

The other doors around her were closed as well, the rooms beyond them darkened. There were six of them. The two on either side of her bedroom were storage closets. The one to the left of that was the bathroom. The door on the opposite wall, near the middle boundary, was the check-up room where the nurses had examined her the previous day. That left two rooms unaccounted for - the one that was occupied, and the one to her left, near the dead-end door.

Azula turned to it and tried the knob, and with a swell of relief, she felt it turn. She gently pushed it open.

Inside, she saw a large space, filled with hazy dark blocks of furniture. The room was about the size of her bedroom, but was more generously filled - along with the ever-present counter and cabinets around the door, there were also three narrow beds, a dresser, a vanity, and a writing desk. Azula stood still near the doorway for a moment, and when she had assured herself that there was nobody
inside, she went in. She felt the frame of one of the beds, and was surprised to touch wood - real, actual wood, not the metal that hers was made of. The beds were all made and kept neat, likely on Kira's orders to have everything in "Tip-top shape!" Azula practically heard the nurse's voice in her head, and snorted.

She went farther. The silence of the room was pervading, making her every shuffle seem to echo. She went towards the vanity table, glimpsing the shadowy reflection of her head and shoulders in the mirror. As she looked at her own face, trying to discern her features, she felt a faint rush of Déjà vu kindle inside of her. For a minute, she imagined being five again, wandering through the family wing in the dead of night when everyone else was fast asleep. Now that she thought about it, she had always been the peculiar one in the family, always the one to go snooping. Zuko had never done it. Early on, she had always tried to tug him along on her excursions, but he had always refused. Was it because he had been afraid of breaking some fictive, unspoken rule? Or had he been afraid of the palace itself? Of what he might discover there? On her part, Azula had never been afraid... or, rather, she had been, just a little bit, but instead of repelling her, that fear had drawn her in, morphing in some strange way into curiosity. The very things she had feared as a child had lured her, calling to some part of her that she had never fully understood. Even in the daytime, she could vaguely feel the secret inner rooms of the palace calling her, like some great beast waiting with its mouth open. Calling for her to wander in, to be swallowed. And never be seen again.

Azula looked at the reflection of the darkened room, and felt that brief childhood panic stir up inside of her. She again got the feeling that something was there with her, or perhaps that she had dipped herself into some different plane of existence. But before the feeling could get too strong, she tore her gaze from the mirror and stepped away.

She went back into the hallway and took a final look at the dead-end door. Then she tiptoed back to her bedroom, but as she passed the occupied room, she slowed down and pressed her ear against the door. From inside, she heard the clink of silverware, followed by the unmistakable sound of a tin tray being placed onto a table.

"All right, girls, dinner's up," came Kira's voice.

Nearby, someone sighed. "Noodles again?"

It was Nira. There was some movement, then Kira answered. "What were you expecting, Nira, a gourmet menu?" There was a pause. "It's all we have. No one said we'd eat like kings."

Azula could almost imagine Nira dully leaning her cheek against her hand. "No one said we'd be so unprepared either..."

"Don't be so morbid," said Kira. "Everything will come in time. What's important is that we have the essentials."

"I guess..." Nira said. "But I hope Dr. Low calls those construction people back soon. This place has too much steel." There was the shift of a padded seat. "And I can't keep looking at that furnace any more. I know they burned coal here, but gosh, that thing is huge..."

This was followed by a scoff. "Please." Without a second's delay, Azula recognized Mira. "That's the last thing on anybody's mind. They're not going to turn this place into a sanctuary. They're only going to do enough to make her buy it, and if we have to live like cavepeople in the meantime, then that's just the price we have to pay." A sip. "Pay for getting ourselves into this mess..."

Azula's eyes widened. She lowered herself to her knees, bringing her ear close to the gap by the floor.
Moments later, Kira responded. "What's wrong with you, Mira? I thought you wanted to help out."

"Yeah, medically!" Mira replied. "But this psychology stuff is really starting to annoy me. If you ask me, if someone's so sick that there's something wrong with their mind, then they're beyond help. I don't know what Dr. Low's up to, but honestly, I don't think it's going to work. Stuff like this is something you're born with. He needs to just suck up his pride and realize that she can't be kept free."

There was another pause. It was broken by Nira's soft voice. "What do you think is wrong with her?"

Mira seemed to ponder her answer for a while, then finally lowered a glass onto the table. "I think it's just a matter of personality," she said. "Some people are normal, and others have worms in their heads that make them angry at everything. Take two of my friends for example. They both have daughters the same age, around five. One's the sweetest, most lovely girl you could ask for. She's always helping her parents, playing fair with other kids, and never says a mean word to anyone. And she wouldn't hurt a fly. The other one would scream and smack things all over the room when something didn't go her way. No matter how many times people taught her patience and respect for property, it seemed like all of it just went through one ear and out the other. Once when I came to visit, I caught her outside smearing mud over the house wall. I didn't know where my friend was looking, but I obviously couldn't let it slide, so I told her to stop. And she took a fistful of mud and flung it at my skirt. What do you say about that? What kind of person do you think she'll grow up to be?"

"That doesn't have to mean anything, though," said Nira. "It could just be a phase. And kids are emotional by definition; even that good girl probably gets angry."

"Yeah, but there's a difference between normal anger and sick anger," Mira said. "A temper tantrum doesn't have to involve biting other people's hands or using your dolls as mallets. Sometimes you can just look at a kid and see that there's no joy in anything for them; everything's too hot, or too small, or too boring. They don't care about anybody else unless those people are giving them presents. Sometimes the parent can be too slow to step in. And sometimes, the child's temper is just too strong to break. You can usually tell it when you look at a person. And her… I don't know about you, but I think when you see her, you know there's something wrong. For these past few days we've done nothing but help her, and she spits in our faces like we're the scum of the earth. I give her food and she talks back to me. And you'd think. A royal child."

Nira gave a hhm. "Well, you can't assume too much about what it's like to be a royal, either."

"I'm not assuming anything, Nira. I'm just telling you what I've experienced with people, and what I can conclude based on those experiences. And I say all that stuff about good discipline is a lie. You're either born with the right sense of how to behave, or you're not. There's just no other explanation." Mira gave a pause. "Now, I don't know if it runs in her family or not. That I can't assume anything about. But whoever her mother was, I almost feel sorry for her. She probably tried her best to control her, but it didn't work." Mira paused again, and seemed to be making a disgusted expression. "You should have seen the way she looked at me. Like I was some kind of monster…"

The other nurses were thoughtfully silent.

Mira seemed to shrug off her cloudiness a moment later, and started again in her regular voice. "I just don't see why we have to be dragged down with her. That's all."

"Then why don't you go back?" asked Nira.
"She can't," Kira cut in. "None of us can. It's security protocol."

"Oh, right, right. That makes sense…"

Kira sighed. "Look, Mira, no one said it would be easy. But we're here already, so we might as well stick with this to the end. Dr. Low will probably have a diagnosis ready soon. Then he'll give us a better idea of what to do."

"Right… So, how does he diagnose people again?" asked Mira. "Does he read the answers she gives for the image test or something?"

"No, I think he looks at how she reacts to the games themselves," Nira said.

"I don't know what he does, girls," Kira replied. "My guess is as good as yours. But I know he knows what he's doing. I've heard him explain his field to people before, back in the upper city, and if there's anyone who should lead a job like this, it's him."

Mira sighed. "Well, I hope you're right…"

They didn't dwell on the topic any more. A moment of silence passed, then Nira made a remark about the mismatched chairs, and their conversation drifted to simple, moronic topics. All the while, Azula remained crouched on her hands and knees, her heart pounding. She kept listening, waiting for them to say something else about her, even the shortest phrase. She ignored the cold floor and the growing pain in her knees, until the sound of footsteps from behind made her jump up. Someone was coming.

Azula started to scramble away, but the feet stopped before they reached the dividing door. Moments later, she heard a knock.

"Dee, do you have a moment?"

The voice of the physical therapist answered. "Isla, is that you? Just a second." From the other side of the hallway, the door to the office swung open.

"Hi, Dee," said Isla. "This might seem silly, but do you have the key to the closet? I think I left mine in the check-up room."

"Of course. Here." There was a metallic jingle, and moments later Azula realized that the middle door was being unlocked. She scampered back to her room and closed the door, just as the one to Dee's wing opened. Isla stopped by one of the narrow closets and unlocked it, pulling a few boxes from the shelves. Then she went into the check-up room. Isla turned on the lights, rummaged around inside, then left. She went back through the dividing door and closed it behind her, and her footsteps retreated into the distance. But she didn't lock it.

Azula waited for the silence to settle in. Then she crept back into the hallway and approached the middle door. She carefully turned the knob, gave it a push, and peered past it. Beyond it, the hallway continued for several doors on either side, a few of which had strips of light in front of them. There was one door open in the distance, casting a square of light on the floor where she could see Isla's shadow moving about. But moments later, the nurse reached out for the doorknob and closed it a little, plunging the wing into darkness.

Azula inched her way forward, keeping close to the darkened rooms. She crept towards Isla's door, which was open by a crack. She peered through it.

Inside, she saw a counter and cabinets, and a narrow bed standing beside the wall. This bed was also
regular, made of wood, just like the beds of the other three nurses. Isla had placed the boxes onto a
table beside the window, which had a myriad of other mixtures and solutions in various stages of
preparation. Moments later, Isla herself stepped into view from the corner and approached the
counter, where she laid out a metal frame and began to piece together a new test tube holder. She
spent some time adjusting the poles and tightening the screws, then finally managed to get a standing
replica of what she had before. Once she was done, she sat down at the mixing table and took one of
the many bowls, this one with a pair of chopsticks. She began to eat, looking askance at her shuttered
window.

Azula watched the nurse for a little while longer, then decided not to push her luck and kept going.
She proceeded up the hallway with bated breath, feeling around the walls for doors as it got darker.
Past Isla's, there was only one other room that had its lights on. As Azula approached, she noticed a
dark gold bar attached to the door. It read: DR. LOW.

Azula's eyes widened, then she narrowed them and pressed her ear to the door. Inside, she heard the
subtle flipping of pages and the clink of a teacup. But nothing else.

She tiptoed away and moved on. Up ahead, there was nothing but darkness. Azula didn't feel any
more doors on Dr. Low's side, and one more on Isla's. She kept going, reflexively lifting her hands in
front of her, till she felt her palms make contact with the dead-end door. She had reached the other
end of the hallway.

She felt around, and her hand closed around the doorknob. It was firmly locked. The door didn't
even have a gap on the bottom. Azula turned around and pressed her back to it, glancing out at the
hallway in its entirety. For some reason, it seemed much smaller than it should have been.

After waiting another few seconds, Azula started to creep back the way she came. She got through
the dividing door unnoticed, slunk past the closets, and slipped back into her bedroom.

She climbed back into her bed, took the key from the bookshelf and locked the handcuff over her
right wrist. Then she put the key back on the shelf where it had been before. She had just finished
rolling her bed back to its place by the wall when she heard the lounge door open, and the three
nurses step out. She quickly jumped under the covers. Someone went up to the dividing door and
pushed it open, then paused.

"Wait," said Nira. "Did we lock this when we came here?"

"Of course," said Kira.

"Well, then someone must have opened it."

Mira let out a breath. "Oh great…"

But right then, there was the sound of rushed footsteps, and someone opened the door. "It was me,"
came Isla's voice. "Relax. I went to get some things from the closet."

"And why didn't you lock the door?" asked Mira.

"I forgot. I was just on my way to lock it now."

"Isla, you can't forget," said Kira. "I know we're here on this side, but we're not all-powerful. What
if Azula got out without us knowing?"

Someone opened the door to Azula's room and peeked inside. "It's okay, she's in there," said Nira,
and closed it again.
"Are you sure?" asked Mira. "You should go check."

"She's sleeping."

"Then she won't notice you."

Nira sighed. Azula closed her eyes and hung her handcuffed arm over the side of the bed, keeping still as best as she could. Nira went back into the room and leaned over Azula's shoulder, then turned away and left. "She's asleep. Relax."

Mira and Kira breathed sighs of relief.

"Good," said Kira.

"Are we happy now?" asked Isla. "Crisis avoided?"

The other three nurses were silent.

"Just be careful," Mira mumbled tiredly. "Every time someone loses their keys, she has the chance to grab them and make a run for it."

"Relax," Kira said. "Isla has her keys. She won't lose them again. Period. There's no need to get all hyped up."

"Yeah," Nira said. "And anyway, even if Azula does get out, there's nowhere really to go."

Mira sighed in agreement. "Yeah. I guess."

Whatever that meant, they left it at that.
Azula thought about that conversation for a long time. Did the hospital have such good security that she really wouldn't have anywhere to go if she made it out of the wing? Or was the building so vast and convoluted that it was hopeless to navigate if she didn't have a floor plan?

In the end, neither of those options satisfied her. If the place was so heavily guarded, then the nurses wouldn't be so worried about their keys. And if the hospital was so big, then why would the head doctor be living only a few doors down from her, cramped in a tiny hallway next to broom closets?

Azula tried to figure it out, but couldn't. Sleep came to her in short bursts, for her mind was too restless for her to relax. Her thoughts kept churning with possible explanations of the situation, and every time she would begin to doze off, she would suddenly jerk awake with her heart pounding, her eyes scanning the confines of the bedroom with increasing desperation. She was beginning to feel like the walls were closing in on her, the still air slowly tightening a chokehold around her neck.

Nevertheless, her exhaustion finally caught up with her, and after a period of forgetfulness, Azula opened her eyes to find that the room was once again brightly lit. The clock on the bookshelf showed nine hours, and to her right, a nurse with long, plain hair was standing at the sink, washing her hands. It was Isla. Azula blinked wearily as the nurse turned around and approached the bed, wondering if her sleepless night showed on her face. But Isla didn't make any comments. She herself had droopy eyes, and yawned a few times as she removed the handcuff from Azula's wrist and put the key back in its place on the shelf. When Azula had sat up, Isla took a breakfast tray from the counter and placed it in her lap.

She left Azula to do the rest for herself, going back to the counter and examining the contents of the upper cabinets. While Azula ate, the nurse took down empty bottles and collected them in a basket, taking note of them on a personal clipboard. With each cabinet she finished, Isla locked the door with a key that dangled from a stretchy bracelet on her wrist, wondering if her sleepless night showed on her face. But Isla didn't make any comments. She herself had droopy eyes, and yawned a few times as she removed the handcuff from Azula's wrist and put the key back in its place on the shelf. When Azula had sat up, Isla took a breakfast tray from the counter and placed it in her lap.

"Ack." With a wince, Isla quickly put the spoon into Azula's mouth and rushed for a towel. She wiped up the spill, regretfully examined the liquid that remained, then placed the bottle back into the cabinet and locked it. She breezed through the rest of the morning routine, brushing Azula's hair and dabbing her face, then took her to the bathroom and handed her a clean jumpsuit. When Azula had changed clothes, Isla eased her into the wheelchair, ignoring the straps, and pushed her into the hallway.

They made the familiar short ride past the middle door and turned into the mind therapy room. At the moment, there was nobody else inside, so Isla pushed Azula behind the lone writing desk in the center, turning her to face the blackboard. Then she left, closing the door behind her.

For a few uneventful moments, Azula stared ahead at the empty teacher's desk, at the neat rows of books and boxes on the bookshelves. Then the door swung open again, revealing Nira, who stepped inside with a hearty wave. "Hi, Azula! It's me and Mira today." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, just as Mira stepped in after her. Mira let the door fall closed, then pulled over a free chair and sat down beside the door.
Nira went over to the desk in the meantime, setting down a bundle of scrolls she had tucked under her arm. She picked one out from the pile and approached Azula's desk. "All right. So, Kira tells me you're good at math. Why don't we start with a few problems to get your mind running?" Nira unrolled the scroll and placed it down in front of Azula, following with a pencil. The paper was filled with trigonometric problems. "I made these just for you. You'll have an hour to solve them. Give them to me when you're done, and I'll tell you how you did. Good luck!" She winked and went back to the desk.

Azula took the pencil and leaned over the paper. She solved the problems one by one, and once she was done, she primly lifted the page into the air, and Nira went to take it. She sat back down at the desk to check it, and moments later, she gaped. "Wow, great job!" She turned to Mira. "Take a look at this. Not a single mistake!"

Mira went over and took a look at the scroll. "Yeah. Neat form." She glanced at Azula. "You must have been a star in school."

Azula folded her hands in her lap. "Yes. I was."

Mira gave a slow nod. But behind her cool expression, Azula could almost feel the nurse's thoughts churning in a poisonous storm. Now that she knew exactly what Mira thought about her, decoding her facial expressions was almost too easy. She watched the nurse sit back down through narrowed eyes, letting their gazes meet for just a moment, then looked away calmly.

At that point, Nira rolled up the scroll and rose to her feet. "Okay. So since we're all in school-mode today, I think that'll be a good topic to start talking about." She took the wooden stool from nearby and moved it up to Azula's table. Once she had sat down, she held up her hands. "Now, I promise I won't ask you how many times you did your homework right before class, or said you did it when you didn't, or any of that stuff. I just want to get to know your life a bit better." Nira smoothed her skirt and folded her hands in her lap. "So. Being a royal child, I'm guessing you must have had private tutors. Right?"

"Yes," said Azula.

"So, you've never been to a regular school?"

"No, I have."

"Aha! And what school was it?"

"The Fire Nation Academy for Young Ladies."

Nira's eyes widened. "Wow." She looked at Mira and nodded. "Fancy!"

Mira gave a nod to appease Nira, then went back to fiddling with a set of keys she had taken out from her pocket. Nira looked back at Azula. "So. Did you have any friends there?"

"Yes," Azula replied.

"How many?"

"Two."

"What were their names?"

"Mai and Ty-Lee," Azula said.
Nira nodded. "And what were they like?"

"Lying, backstabbing traitors."

Nira's smile dipped down. "Oh. So… you got into fights?"

Azula shrugged. "You could say that."

Nira twisted a lock of hair around her finger. "Oh. Well, um, I guess that's not good…" She pondered for a moment, then brightened. "How did you meet them?"

"I don't remember."

Nira frowned. "Not even a little?"

"I suppose we were in the same class group," Azula said. "We started talking. How else do you think friends meet?"

Nira shrugged. "Well, I guess they could meet in all sorts of ways. But it's okay if you can't remember. I just want to get a general picture." She tapped her chin. "Now. Did the other girls in your school know you were the princess?"

"Of course."

"And what did they think about that?"

"They respected me," Azula said. "And they feared me. In a good way, I mean. They knew not to mess with me."

"Okay." Nira nodded. "And did you like your relationship with the girls in your school, or do you wish you had done something differently?"

"I don't know what you mean," Azula said.

"Well, do you look back on any moments and think, 'Hey, I really shouldn't have done that', or 'I think I should have treated her differently', or anything like that? Everyone has little regrets like that at some point."

Azula let the nurse's words drift off into silence. "No."

Nira sighed. "Well, that's okay too, if you can't remember."

"No," Azula said, more firmly. "I mean I don't have any regrets. I'm fine with everything I did, and I wouldn't change a thing even if you made me go back a hundred times."

Nira lifted an eyebrow. "So you're completely happy with how everything went?"

"Yes."

"And nothing ever upset you?"

"No."

Nira lifted her eyebrows and nodded. "Wow." She glanced at Mira for confirmation, then looked back at Azula. "Then you're one happy camper. I was going to spill the beans about how I accidentally locked everyone out of the craft room when I was seven. The art teacher never trusted
anyone with her keys, but I was one of her favorite students, and that day she made an exception for me and asked me to get a few more brushes from the storage room. And that room had a really tricky lock, one of those strange kinds that lock themselves the minute the door falls closed, and there was only one key to it. And when I was on my way back with the supplies, I realized that I left the keys in the room! So I had to fess up to what I did in front of everyone. That still bugs me sometimes!"

Nira giggled. "Maybe I should be the one in therapy..."

Behind her, Mira shook her head, then turned her attention back to her lap. She had taken out a second key ring from her pocket, this one with four keys attached to the loop, and was examining it. The first ring, which held only three, dangled from her finger. "Speaking of keys, did you see my Number Four anywhere?" she said.

Nira frowned. "No. Did you drop it?"

Mira looked at the three keys again, each of which, Azula now saw, had a red number painted on the side. "That or I labeled these wrong. One was for our bedroom, Two was for my storage box, Three for the lounge..."

"What's Four for?"

"The supply closets in the hallway."

"I could always open them for you if you want. Why do you need them?"

"Because Kira told me to wash the floor on this side. But I'm not doing it until I find my key and get a new key ring, because this one is piece of crap." Mira slid the three keys along the loop until they popped out of a loose end in the coil. "See? I try to take one out, and all the others keep slipping!"

Nira nodded. "All right, I'll help you when we're done. But we gotta finish this talk first." She looked at Azula again and smoothed her skirt. "Okay... So, another question." Nira began to tap her chin. "Hmm... Okay, I can't think of any. Do you want to try one, Mira?"

Mira thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Who was your favorite teacher?"

Azula scanned her memory for a name. "Mrs. Song, the calligraphy teacher."

"What did you like about her?"

Azula spent the next minute detailing the qualities of a teacher she hardly remembered. Naturally, this led Nira to ask about her other teachers, then about her private tutors, which spiraled into a sequence of various other moronic answer prompts, like a teacher's strangest personality quirk, the funniest thing that had ever happened in class, or the most impossible homework assignment she had ever received. Azula fabricated her responses from bits of memories, telling stories that never happened just to deflect the questions. It wasn't as if they could fact-check her, anyway.

The session lasted for two hours, and by the time Nira finally wheeled her out of the room, Azula's head was aching. She wasn't sure how long she could keep this up. If each day the nurses would squeeze her brain like this, soon her replies would start contradicting themselves, and that would lead to more questions. That or she'd have to keep constant tabs on what she said, planning her future responses in advance, and in her current state Azula knew she wouldn't be able to manage it. The pressure would build up inside of her again, her mind would snap, she'd come crashing down, and the nurses would start the whole thing over. She couldn't fake her way out of this. Nor would the silent treatment work on them for long. So that left only one option - get out.

Azula thought back to the nurses' nighttime conversation. Clearly, there was something more to the
hospital building than what they were telling her. They were putting on a guise, and though Azula wasn't exactly sure what they were covering up, she had the feeling it was nothing good. The hospital wasn't in Capital City, so it was likely somewhere in the central Fire Nation, deep in the countryside where it would be much easier to run a secret operation. Azula knew that Zuko couldn't have built this entire building himself; he simply wouldn't have had the time. And Kira had said that Dr. Low ran some sort of practice in the Capital City... so perhaps, this hospital had existed before, and was his secret affiliation, a place where he and doctors like him did mystical, psychological experiments on people the government deemed dangerous. And by using some old palace contacts, Zuko was able to get in touch with him. Of course, he'd find it the perfect place to put her, the evil, crazy princess. Now the question was, who else was there with her? Kira had said there were dozens of other patients... so perhaps there were dozens of other wings exactly like hers, each with their own team of moronic, smiling nurses, all swarming around one isolated individual, led by one person who called themselves the head doctor. If Azula could see one of the other patients, even for the shortest moment, even if the nurses caught her and strapped her to her bed for a week, that would be enough to calm her down. It would give her a foothold. It would mean that she was ahead of Dr. Low and the others, even if it was only by the smallest step.

Azula thought about all of this as Nira wheeled her into the physical therapy room. She vaguely watched the nurse leave, still immersed in speculation. But hardly a second later, her attention was diverted by Dee, who rose from her desk and scooted the wheelchair inside.

"Come in, come in." Dee closed the door behind her. Azula looked up, and to her surprise noticed Isla, who was standing beside the therapist's desk.

Dee grasped Azula's wrists and raised her arms out in front of her. "Keep them in the air for me. Do they feel heavy?"

"Yes."

Dee turned to Isla. "I want to give her a little bit of antidote. She needs to work on strength today."

Isla nodded. "Coming right up." She left the room, bringing back a bottle of green paste, and gave Azula a spoonful. The mixture tasted like grass and chunks of sand. Azula spent several seconds chewing it, like a cow, before she finally swallowed it. The taste made her shudder. But after a minute, some of her exhaustion lifted, and she began to stretch.

Dee gave a nod. "Very good." She took Azula by the shoulder and helped her to her feet.

"We'll have to dose her immediately after you're done, though," Isla said. "Otherwise the antidote will keep on working, and she could start firebending."

"Don't worry, this shouldn't take longer than half an hour." Dee placed Azula onto the mat and rolled over a medicine ball. "Now. You're going to take this in both hands and touch the floor with it from one side to the other. Don't lift your legs."

She laid Azula down on her back and showed her the motion. Azula began to move the ball from side to side, taking a rest after every tenth round as Dee had instructed. But occasionally, she took a peek at the two women, who had lapsed into light conversation in the meantime. In particular, Azula focused on Isla. She remembered seeing her bedroom, which had seemed more like a workroom, filled to the brim with mixtures and test tubes. So far, she was the only one Azula had seen to restock a bottle or fiddle with a medicine pouch. Isla was clearly the one who made the serum, so it was very likely the she made the other things as well. Perhaps that was why she was always more efficient and less upbeat than the other three. She was focused, which made her less chatty, but also more forgetful. That was why she had forgotten to lock that middle door the previous night. She was the
one who carried the entire burden of making the medicines, so if any of them were lost... then Isla would have to make more.

Azula began to draft a plan in her mind, thinking in short bursts between motions. Once she finished with the medicine ball, Dee made her do several more exercises, and when the therapy session finally ended, Isla wheeled Azula back to her room for quiet hour. On their way down the hallway, they passed Mira and Nira, who were both holding sets of keys and having a heated discussion.

"I don't understand, why can't it just be one key for everything? Why does Dr. Low have to make things so complicated?"

"It's not that hard, Mira, look - I painted colored dots on mine so I could remember them. My storage one is red, the cabinet keys are blue…"

Isla passed them by, and once she had parked Azula's chair beside the bed, she left the room. Azula scanned the surfaces nearby, and with a flutter of her heart, she saw Mira's other key ring resting deep on a shelf in the bookcase. Coming in from the front of the room, Isla hadn't seen it.

Meanwhile, from the hallway, Azula heard Isla approach the other nurses. "Will one of you dose her with the serum? I have to run to the storage room," she said.

"Yeah, sure, just a moment!" said Nira. But neither of them moved from their place.

Azula waited for a few more seconds to make sure that no one was coming, then sprang out of her wheelchair and grabbed the keys. Then she tiptoed to the cabinets above the counter and began to test the lock. The keys were numbered five through eight, and on Key Number Six, the lock turned. Azula pocketed the keys and opened the door, revealing the neat rows of colorful bottles, some with glued-on labels, all neatly turned to face the user. Azula scooped them up by the handful, removed the corks, and began to pour their contents into the sink. A smile traced its way up her face as she watched the colorful liquids swirl down the drain and disappear.

She was in the process of emptying the last shelf of bottles when the door swung open. Mira stepped inside, and when she saw the mass of empty bottles on the counter, she screamed. "KIRAAAA!"

Two more heads clunked into her - Nira's and Kira's, and the latter slapped her palms against her chest. "No!" She grabbed Azula and pushed her into the wheelchair, frantically locking the straps around Azula's legs and waist. "Get Isla. Now."

Mira spun around on her heel and left the room. Moments later, she came back with Isla in hot pursuit, and when Isla saw what had happened, her face went as white as a sheet. "You… how…" She lifted one of the empty bottles with a shaking hand, sloshing around a final droplet of orange liquid. Then she looked up, scanning each face in the room, finally settling on Kira's. "How did she unlock the cabinets?"

Kira frowned. "I'm not sure. I know I locked them last night before I left."

Mira quietly clamped her hands over her mouth. But no one noticed. Instead, Kira looked at Azula.

Azula shrugged, putting on a dazed, clueless expression. "They were open when I got here. I thought it would be fun."

Kira gave an exhausted sigh and looked at the other nurses. "Which one of you forgot to lock the cabinets?"

For a moment, the room was silent. Finally, Mira dropped her hands to her sides. "Okay, okay, it
was me! I opened them because I wanted to get some rags to wash the floor, but then my keys slipped off my other key ring, so I left the room to get a new one. It's not like I'm supposed to lock all the cabinets again if I'm only leaving for a few seconds, am I?"

"Yes!" Isla shouted. She turned to Mira, eyes blazing in rage and despair. "Or, am I not understanding something? Are her sedatives and sleeping medication somehow less important to you than your broom closets? Do you think serum and tranquilizer just rain down from the sky?"

Mira was taken aback. "No, of course not! It's just - it's just that I forgot because I was frustrated." She paused, collecting herself. "I wanted to make sure it would never happen again, and I knew that Azula was supposed to be in therapy with you and Dee, so I didn't suppose that I had to lock the doors right away. I would have gotten a new key ring and gone right back in the room to do it!"

"Are you sure?" Isla said. "Something tells me you'd have rather gone back to your room and complained about it! Then sat around in the lounge all day and waited till it was time for lunch, and spent another day doing nothing while other people took care of everything for you!"

By now, Nira was biting her lip, nervously tapping her fingers together. "But... but, it's not that bad, right? I mean it's not like Azula needs all that medicine now. You still have time to make more..."

"Yeah, I'll just go ahead and make more!" Isla said. "While you three sit around filing your nails, I'll stay up all night stewing bases and sifting powder. Or maybe one of you want to take my place for a change? Instead of whining all day that Dr. Low won't make everything better for you -" she glared at Mira, "- complaining about your keys, and how stupid all this psychology stuff is, why don't you actually try doing the job he told you to do?"

Mira blinked in shock. "What? What are you talking about? I do my job!" She looked at Nira. "Tell me I don't do my job!"

"Neither of you do your job!" Isla cut in. "You two act like you're in school! You act like if you wheel your patient into room one, room two, do a talk for a few minutes, do some exercises later, then everything will be fine! I suppose she's supposed to heal herself, then, for the rest of the day while you spend your time gossiping? Or were you just waiting for Dr. Low to start his therapy sessions with her and take the load off your schedules?"

By now the room was dead silent. Mira's cheeks had flushed red, and Nira's head was bowed. From beside Azula, Kira gave a sigh. "All right, Isla, I understand you're upset-"

"Upset?" Isla glanced at Kira. "My, has it finally gotten to you?" She turned around and scooped all the emptied bottles into her arms. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be in the storage room. But don't expect me to have anything ready by tomorrow. I'm not a miracle worker..." She pushed the door aside with her foot and stormed out.

Once she was gone, Nira looked up. "Wow. I never knew she could get that angry..."

Mira scowled, still pink in the face. "Hmph. It's not like she never forgot to lock anything..."

Grumbling, the nurse strolled out without another word.

Nira was left standing by the door uncertainly, and Kira sighed, placing a hand on the back of Azula's wheelchair. "You can go, Nira. I'll take it from here."

Nira nodded and left the room.

Left alone with Azula, Kira closed the door and knelt down in front of her. She sat up so that their faces were level, and waited until Azula was looking right into her eyes. "You have to stop doing
this, honey," she said. "We're here to help you. Everything we're doing here, everything we have here, is for your own good. Dr. Low already told you that the war is over. There's nothing left to fight over. If there's still some enemy running around in your imagination, or some battle you feel you have to finish, then you'd best let it go. If you want to go home, then congratulations, because you're already here. There is absolutely nothing for you to be doing anywhere else. Your brother has given Dr. Low a royal decree that you aren't to leave this hospital until you regain all of your physical and mental faculties. Which, if you keep on sabotaging your treatment, won't be for a long time."

With that, Kira stood up. She left the room, and once the door fell closed behind her, Azula uncrossed her arms. She reached into her pocket, looked down at Mira's second set of keys in her palm, and smiled.

Azula lowered her hand down to the leg straps and felt around for one of the locks. The energy that had slowly been building up inside of her since the physical therapy session had now intensified to a tangible flow. She gathered up her focus, felt the mysterious stir of the chi-current inside of her, which this time produced a familiar hum of heat that radiated to her palm. The tiny lock began to melt, and with a click, she pulled the strap free of the deformed metal.

She did this to all the others, moving up from her legs to her torso, until finally, all of the straps had drooped to the floor. Azula pushed herself to her feet, and for the first time in weeks, walked away in freedom.

She left the bedroom, tiptoed past the closets and lounge, and slipped through the middle door that hung ajar by a few inches. She passed the therapy rooms and the other doors in the second wing, quickening her pace to the door at the very end of the hallway. She tried Mira's keys on the lock, but none of them worked. Whispering a curse, she glanced over her shoulder. People had begun to move behind the middle door.

She stepped back from the door and approached the nearest one, to her left. She pressed her ear against it, but heard nothing inside. Azula began to try the lock, and on the third key, the door popped open.

Bating her breath, Azula peeked inside. She saw a gray sunlit wall, but there appeared to be no moving shadows, so she slipped inside and closed the door behind her. The floor was made of cold stone, and there were large steel air filters on the ceiling. Farther in, there were a few tea tables and bookshelves, which didn't look one bit at home with their carved wooden frames.

Azula continued to walk in small steps. At the very end, the room swerved off and led into another one that she couldn't fully see. But the deeper in she went, the more she began to distinguish the sound of rushing wind - the same sound she had heard when she had listened at her window. She passed more mismatched decorations as she went along - a carpet, a table, some vases atop an empty bookshelf. All the while, her eyes followed the rays of light on the floor until she finally found their source - a large window on a far wall. It was covered by a set of curtains, and nothing else.

Slowly, Azula approached it. The sound of rushing wind grew louder, as did the beating of her heart. She took long, slow steps, until finally, she reached for the curtains and pulled them open. A flood of bright, golden sunlight spilled into the room. The amber in her eyes lit up, her pupils contracted, and her dull hair stood out in sudden, shining contrast to her paled face. And finally she realized that the sounds she had taken to be wind hadn't been wind at all.

They were waves.

Azula found herself staring out at a vast open sea, which stretched out in every direction and went on
towards the horizon without speck of land in sight.

Breath quickening, Azula turned and ran on, following the sequence of large, doorless rooms. Soon, the scattered furniture and decorations ceased entirely, leaving vast barren spaces whose walls were lined with steel pipes, gaping chutes, and large ventilators. Small, square windows were dispersed every now and then on the wall to her right, revealing the same sea, the same empty sky. At the very end of the wing was a final empty space, hardly even a room, headed by a large rectangular window with no curtains. Azula stopped before it, again met by the shoreline, where calm waves were lapping just a short distance from the building. They were framed by a stripe of spotless gray sand.

From somewhere far away, a door closed.

"Wait, where's my other key ring?" said Mira.

Footsteps.

"What do you mean?" Nira replied.

"I thought I had it with me."

"I think you left it in Azula's room. Check there."

A pause.

"What in the world…what happened to the wheelchair?"

"KIRA!"

Doors began to slam. Azula took a few steps away from the window, feeling her surroundings spin and blur as the cold claws of realization tightened around her. All of a sudden, the faraway door to the hidden room banged open. A horde of people rushed inside, following Azula's trail, finally spilling into the room she was standing in. Azula turned around, hardly aware of her own shaking, meeting a tide of white uniforms and widened eyes. Her face contorted.

"LIARS!" she screamed. "YOU PUT ME ON A DESERTED ISLAND!"

One of the nurses stepped towards her and reached out. "Azula!"

But it was too late. Azula punched her fist forward with all the fury she could muster, and the emotion materialized in a blast of bright blue fire. The nurses screamed and scattered to opposite sides of the room. Azula launched another blast, and some of them countered it, throwing up shields of red flame that mixed in with the blue and dissipated. From the flurry of smoke, Kira stepped forward, arms poised in a firebending form. "Everyone corner her! Isla, get some tranquilizing mist."

Isla ducked out of the room and ran away, just in time as Azula released another blast at the nurses who were still standing by the door. She punched fire at the walls, trying to pin down the scampering figures, countering the feeble spurts of their flames with torrents of her own. She no longer registered their faces or what they were saying behind the screams. At that moment she was back in the Agni Kai arena, her flames surging with the rhythm of her emotions, her mind blocked of everything save for the attacks of her opponents and her own roaring fire. The temperature in the room spiked, the air became so thick with smoke that even she began to have trouble breathing, but she continued to take in the heat, sucking it in with every breath and channeling it back out through her hands. An onslaught of red fire blasts came to her from various corners of the room, and Azula spun a cocoon of blue flames around herself to block them. Then before the fires could fade, she leaned forward and rocketed herself out of the room. She skated for a few seconds over the floor, then landed on her feet.
and began to run back in the direction of the hallway. She scorched everything in her sight as she went - the walls, the floor, the furniture - leaving behind black char marks and melted edges.

She reached the hallway in a cloud of smoke, footsteps pounding from behind her. Doors began to swing open on all sides, but they were immediately closed in defense as Azula hurled a large flame whip at the floor. Some nurses caught up with her and tried to attack, kicking her in the back and trying to grasp her arms. Dee the therapist sprang out from the side and began to tap at her shoulders, trying to chi block her, but Azula hit her with a blazing blue fist, making her fall back, throwing up a veil of red flames just in time to shield herself.

Azula ran on, throwing flares and comet-balls in every direction, grabbing the melted knobs of doors and wrenching them open. There was another broom closet. A shower room. A barrack-like wing with lots of bunk beds. The nurses tried to pull her away from the rooms at first, but gradually they began to cow away from her attacks, first falling behind her then desperately trying to catch up. Blurred with tears and smoke, Azula's gaze locked on the dead-end door on the other side of the hallway. She rocketed herself towards it, shooting forward at such speed that she collided with the door and fell to her knees. She removed Mira's set of keys from the pocket of her jumpsuit and began to try the lock. On the third key, the lock turned, and Azula pulled open the door.

The room that opened itself up before her was large, empty, and gray, with square windows lining the opposite wall. There was a small hallway swerving off to the right, leading to a place Azula couldn't see. Sounds of calm conversation and footsteps rose up from somewhere beyond it, gradually growing louder and drawing close. Moments later, Dr. Low stepped into view, one hand calmly tucked behind his back, the other raised to his chin as he talked something over with a man who walked beside him, a simple construction worker. Upon seeing Azula, both of them stopped. Dr. Low frowned in surprise, then as a rush of footsteps approached Azula from behind, his eyes widened.

Shaking and sobbing, Azula stepped towards him. "I'm going to kill you!"

She extended two forefingers on both hands and began to arc them through the air, creating a burst of electric sparks that weaved into long threads in the air. Sounds of electricity hummed and crackled as the threads grew into bolts, making her hair stand up and illuminating the doctor's frozen face. Azula weaved the bolts faster, gradually getting the lightning poised for the striking point.

From behind, there was a series of muffled sounds as someone pushed their way through the crowd. "I have the mist - oh dear Raava!"

But Isla's exclamation came too late. Azula lifted an arm and shot forward the bolt, letting the lightning course through the path she had made in her body. But right before the bolt escaped, her head split open with pain, a wave so strong that her eyes widened and she gave a cry. Reflexively, Azula's hands flew to her head, and instead of shooting its target, the lightning retracted, surrounding her in a cage and disappearing. Azula's knees gave way, and right then the world she had managed to hold still for those few seconds came crashing down on her. The tide of nurses rushed forward to sweep around her, blocking the ceiling light with their heads, their voices swarming around her in a chorus. In their midst she saw the hazy maroon shape of Dr. Low appear over her, relaying rapid instructions. All the while Azula lay curled up on the floor, clutching her hammering head, tears streaming down her face.

At that moment, a familiar voice spoke out from somewhere far away.

"I love you, Azula. I do."

A hot, bitter wave ripped through her, this time in her chest, and the tears began to gush with greater
intensity. Azula's moans became screams. "No! Go away! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

But this time, she couldn't suppress it. The woman from the dream swam into her mind, flooding her with her presence, firing up the old places of pain and anger that formed the deep, ravaged wound inside of her. It rose up around her like a valley - filled with gnarled thoughts, splintered memories, cracked by the sheer force of the anger she had hurled at them. She sank deeper and deeper into its depths, while the real world blurred behind a flood of tears, then suddenly a heavy blanket dropped over her and everything went black.
The first person to call Azula evil had been her brother, Zuko. But one had to put the situation in context. Azula had been three, Zuko four. Even at that age, Azula had begun to show an unusual proficiency in firebending, though at that point its only manifestation was an ability to sustain flames for long periods of time. Her hands, as people remarked, were like little candles. She would press the thumb and forefingers of each hand together into a wick and make flames for fun, sometimes throwing them up into the air and watching them dissipate. When she realized that fire left burn marks on wood, she began to scorch the walls and floor of her room to create various designs and drawings. And she's always give a sullen sigh when Ursa or the servants reprimanded her for it.

The only other firebender she could spend a sufficient amount of time with was Zuko, so Azula would always pester him to play with her. Zuko would tolerate her for an hour or so, but then their games would always disintegrate into the same scenario – Azula igniting flames with her hands and chasing Zuko around the house. She badly wanted to play Agni Kai with him, because she heard it involved firebending, but Zuko scowled and said that she had no idea what she was talking about.

"It's a duel, Azula. Not a game."

"Then duel me!" Azula said. "Come on, Zuzu! Let's see who can make the biggest fire!"

Zuko didn't always comply with her requests, saying he had more important things to do like read or study. But he ran when she chased him, and to her, that was enough. Though what Azula really wanted was for Zuko to stop running one day and turn around to play with her.

Once, while she was chasing him around the tree by turtle duck pond, Azula thought of a way to get Zuko's attention and fired a small flame at his back. She had meant to do it lightly, but Zuko still yowled and fell down. Azula came to a stop beside him, thinking that her plan had worked, but when Zuko stood up, he was blushing and fuming.

"You're evil, Azula," he said. And with that, he stomped away.

Something had emptied inside of her right then, and Azula began to wonder if she had been playing the villain the whole time. But after a moment, she pushed the worry aside. If she had to be the villain, then she would enjoy it. And then it wouldn't matter what Zuko thought about her.

Azula would enjoy being evil, which meant that she would keep chasing Zuko around the yard, only this time just to have him run from her, keep making secret drawings on her walls despite Ursa telling her not to, and cross her arms when her servants reprimanded her instead of hanging her head. She pretended that they didn't know what they were talking about, that they simply didn't care to try to understand her.

Still, at certain points, she'd get tired of it. She'd want to just sit around calmly and have Zuko show her things of his own accord, telling her about what he was learning from his tutors. She'd want Ursa to look at something she wrote and see a warm smile on her face, not just because she had done it on paper this time. She didn't want to have to shoot flames to get people's attention.

By the time Azula turned five, her parents decided to send her to a Fire Nation school instead of keeping her in the palace with private instructors. They had done the same for Zuko a couple years prior in order to expose him more to society and get him to start making a name for himself among
the sons of the other nobles. After considering several options for Azula, Ursa and Ozai finally settled on the Royal Fire Academy for Girls. It was elite, meaning that Azula would be surrounded by girls who could be considered her peers. It was prestigious, meaning that she would be taught by the best and brightest teachers in the Fire Nation. And it was located right in the upper city, so she could walk home at the end of the day and take her firebending lessons in the courtyard. Those were the only private-taught lessons she'd have left, for Ozai would never entrust them to anyone he didn't personally appoint.

Azula had always enjoyed her private lessons, most of all the feeling of connection and closeness she had attained with her tutors. They had been like her guardians. They spent time alone with her for hours, guiding her on countless journeys through history and literature, arts and science. They were all specialists in their fields, and despite having similarly taught many other children in the past, they set on educating her as if she were their only student. They carefully honed her ability to think and create, challenging her and correcting her, as if she were a developing artwork being molded into a masterpiece. She had been somewhat downcast to see them leave, and wasn't sure that she would ever get the same intimate feeling in a classroom. But on the upside, the prospect of meeting other girls her age brought her the excitement of novelty.

As the days went by leading up to the start of school, Azula spent more and more time looking over outfits from her closet and going through the blank scrolls in her writing desk, wondering how she would look next to the other girls and how her abilities would compare to theirs. Finally, on the first day of school, she and Ursa got up early, left the palace on foot, and set out into the calm, sunny streets of Capital City. They had left their customary headpieces at home and had opted for more reserved clothing, and now walked hand-in-hand like any normal mother and daughter.

Even in simplicity, Ursa possessed a lightness and elegance that was almost otherworldly. She wasn't a firebender, and yet she radiated life, imbibing it into every space she occupied. She couldn't stand on her hands, but on her feet she seemed as graceful as an acrobat. She probably couldn't defend herself against a horde of attackers, but the world would mourn if she got hurt.

With her father, Azula felt safe and coveted, comforted by the strong, protective aura that his presence gave off. But with her mother, she felt vulnerable and small, like a tiny bug squinting up at the brilliant sun. She could feel its warmth around her, treasured its presence, and yet was awed at how it could care for something so little.

Azula was walking at her mother's side now, keeping a tight grip on her hand, actively scanning her surroundings.

"So what's the building supposed to look like?" she asked. "Is it big?"

Ursa, who was looking around as well, replied a moment later. "Well, I haven't seen it myself, but from what the scouts told me, it's built for about five hundred girls."

Azula's mouth fell open. "Five hundred?"

Ursa smiled. "Well, imagine if about a fourth of the number of people at the Fire Lord's birthday gala had daughters your age. That's how many girls will be in your level group. And then those level groups are divided into about three class groups that take all their classes together. So, for most of the time it'll be you and maybe fifteen other girls."

Azula nodded. "Okay. I guess fifteen doesn't sound as bad... Was that what your school was like, too?"

Ursa gave a moment's pause. "Hm. Well, sort of. My class group was about twenty kids, me
included. But we lived in a very small town, so that was the only class group for kids our age. We ended up getting very close."

"Will I get close to the girls in my class too?"

"Of course! Just give it some time, and you'll see how much all of them have to offer in terms of companionship, and how much you have to offer too. Remember - you're more than just the princess. You're also a girl like everyone else, so don't be afraid to just talk about your interests or your life if you want to. Don't worry about ranks."

Azula nodded. "Yeah, I won't. And anyway, it sounds like being in school will be a lot more interesting than being cooped up in the palace all day. I could talk about that."

Ursa laughed. "That could be a start."

They continued walking straight down the road, until Azula noticed a large, pointed roof emerge from behind a row of trees. Ursa quickened her pace, and together they veered onto a stone-paved path that led into a spacious courtyard. Up ahead, a large building greeted them atop a platform, with clean white walls, shuttered windows, and a pagoda roof with raised eaves.

"Here we are!" Ursa said. "We might even be a little early... Let's take a peek inside."

They ascended the steps to the building, where Ursa lifted one of the gold door knockers and struck it against the wood a few times. Moments later, one of the doors opened and a man in robes stepped out and bowed to them.

"Welcome. My name is Gao. I am the schoolmaster."

"Hello, Master Gao. My daughter is registered." Ursa reached into an inner pocket of her robe and pulled out a scroll.

The schoolmaster unfurled it to read the papers inside and bowed again. "Ah, yes. It is an honor, Princess Ursa. Then he turned to Azula and inclined his head. "Princess Azula, you are the first arrival this morning. The other girls should be arriving in a few minutes. In the meantime, you may make yourself comfortable."

He opened the door wider, leading them into a sumptuously-decorated entrance room. It had a carpet, vases, and several benches along the walls. But there wasn't a single student or parent inside.

Azula and Ursa stopped somewhere in the middle of the room, and Master Gao was about to leave through a door in the back. But Azula stepped after him.

"Wait, Master Gao?"

The master turned back to her. "Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone I'm the princess," Azula said, after a moment of thought. "And don't bow to me. I'll tell them myself."

"Of course."

He gave a small final bow and left, and once the two of them were alone, Ursa knelt down to face Azula.

"I'll come for you in the afternoon, so you can tell me how everything went." She placed her hands
on Azula's shoulders and kissed her on the nose. "I love you."

Azula started to look down, but something in her mother's smile tugged her gaze back up and coaxed a sheepish smile out of her. She met Ursa in a quick hug. "I love you too. I'll see you!"

Ursa smiled warmly and stood up. She walked away towards the entrance door, gave a final little wave, and started back down the steps.

Left alone, Azula took a seat on one of the side benches and waited, hands in her lap, for the other girls to start coming in. The first ones arrived one or two at a time, flanked by one or both parents, and went through a similar process of showing a registration form to Master Gao. Soon, the other girls began to occupy the benches around Azula. Some of them sat together, obviously familiar with each other already, but others sat like she was doing now, cautious and alone. Azula calmed her anxiousness through observation, discreetly studying each girl's face and demeanor, trying to predict which of them she might end up friends with.

As the minutes went by, the room became filled with voices and became a storm of pink, red, and maroon clothing. Girls began to come in by the dozen, and soon nearly every bench had two or three occupants. For some reason, Azula's managed to stay free for a while, until at one point, she heard a faint rustle and creak of wood as someone sat down.

She looked over her shoulder to glimpse the new arrival. The girl had light brown hair that skimmed her shoulders, partially tied back in a low half-bun. She wore a brown vest over a pink sleeved shirt, a skirt, and simple, round shoes. She was currently focused on a scroll in her lap, casually tapping her toes on the floor.

Azula took a closer look at the text she was reading. It was a school brochure, something that looked like it was meant for a parent. A moment later, the girl noticed her reading and smiled.

"Hello," Azula offered.

The girl looked up at her. "Hi," she replied, kindly. She rolled the scroll up and let it rest in her lap. "I'm Kyla. What's your name?"

"Azula."

"It's nice to meet you, Azula."

"It's nice to meet you, too." A brief silence settled in, and Azula looked down at the scroll. "I see you had a pamphlet there. I don't think I've ever seen it before. Where did you get it?"

"Oh. They mail these out to girls who don't live around here. I live in Shu Cheng, a few miles north."

Azula nodded. She had never seen the city, but knew it was one of the closest ones to the capital crater. But strangely, she couldn't remember hearing of any nobles who had houses there. "So are your parents there right now?" she asked.

"My mom is. She's taking care of our store. But my dad works in the lower city here sometimes, and he's rented an apartment for us while classes are in session."

"Is that why they wanted you to come here?"

"Well, that's how he found out about it. But I got in on merit. They had teachers from here come and give me exams, and at the end they said I could go here."
Azula nodded. "Impressive."

"And yourself?"

"My dad's a palace noble," Azula said. "We have a house here, and this was the closest school."

Kyla smiled. "That's great!"

As they waited for the remainder of the arrivals, Azula pondered the girl she had just met. So she
didn't come from a noble family, but she did have a certain solidarity about her, like the kind of
person who didn't suck up to fame and riches. And though she likely wasn't very affluent, she did
appear to be bright.

Azula took a moment to look around at the other girls. All of the benches were filled up by now, so
many had taken to standing at the center of the room. One group that caught her eye was a septuplet
of girls who appeared to be sisters, all with long, braided brown hair and similar, mainly-pink outfits.
As she observed them, she realized to her surprise that they weren't just sisters, but identical twins.
They all had copies of the same round face and eyes, not differing even in height. They didn't seem
interested in anybody else around them, and were talking amongst each other with bubbly giggles in
between. After a few minutes, Azula tore her attention away from them and back to Kyla, who had
opened her scroll in the meantime and had resumed reading.

At last, Master Gao came out from his corner to the center of the room, and a line of three teachers
emerged from the back door to stand beside him. The room gradually grew quiet, and when
everyone had fixed their gazes on them, the teachers stepped out one by one with scrolls in their
hands and read off the names of the girls who were to leave with them. The first woman took around
twenty, who got into a line and followed her through the door. Then the second teacher stepped
forward and called another twenty girls from their confused clump, including three of the twins, who
instantly vocalized their sadness and regret, embracing with their sisters before parting. That left
about twenty girls. Not wasting time, the third teacher simply stepped towards them and nodded.

"All right, the rest of you with me."

Azula and Kyla exchanged glances.

"Would you like to sit together?" asked Kyla.

Azula smiled. "Sure!"

She got up and hurried to the front of the line, taking the very first spot. Kyla stepped behind her, and
once the other girls had assembled as well, they followed the woman into a hallway. She brought
them into a small, orderly classroom, with wooden pair desks and a large green chalkboard. Azula
immediately went to the front desk in the center row and sat down. Thankfully, Kyla didn't seem to
mind the choice and sat next to her. The other tables gradually filled up, and finally, the woman
closed the door.

The first lesson of the day was math. Azula found that her preparation with the tutors had been more
than enough; many of the algebraic and geometric problems Mrs. Wang gave them for their initial
assessment seemed like review. Kyla also seemed to be solving them well, and though she did get a
few problems wrong, she immediately raised her hand and asked for clarification. After they finished
correcting their work, they spent an hour doing drills, before Mrs. Wang left and Mrs. Song came in
to start calligraphy.

Finally, after three lessons in the same room, it was time for lunch break. Azula and Kyla got their
food from the buffet and sat down at one of the long tables, choosing spots near the middle of the room. One table behind them, the clique of seven twins all sat together, wearing various expressions of humor and delight on their identical faces. Azula watched them for a moment, mystified at how such a degree of similarity could be possible. It was actually a bit comical. But the longer she observed them, the more she found herself becoming attune to their subtle individual differences and quirks. She noticed that one of them had a slightly wider smile than her neighbor, while another gestured actively with her hands when she talked. A third was the tiniest bit shorter than the others.

At one point, another one of the twins rose from her seat and took a few steps back from the table. "Watch, Lo! This is how you do it." She lifted her hands over her head and leaned down to the floor, then a moment later her legs were hovering vertically in the air, feet bending down and touching her head. Azula nearly gaped in surprise at the fact that she would attempt a handstand in a cafeteria, but the girl didn't fall. She began to walk, moving her hands almost as if they were in fact her feet, her actual feet hovering over her head like the tail of a scorpion.

She drew close to the edge of the table, right as another girl left the food line with her tray and made her way in the same direction. She had ink-black hair and wore a similarly-black vest over a red dress, and was currently looking at something in her tray. Moments later, the two of them bumped together, the acrobat's feet kicking the daydreamer in the head, and the contents of the girl's tray splattering all over her clothes.

The black-haired girl could do nothing but gape, her now-empty tray hanging loosely from her hand. The acrobat immediately got out of the pose and stood upright, and when she saw what she had done, she clamped her hands over her mouth. "Oh no! I'm so sorry!"

The black-haired girl clenched her jaw. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"I will, I will!" The girl picked up an apple that had fallen to the floor and put it back onto the tray. "Don't be so mad, okay?"

"I'll be what I want to be, thanks." The black-haired girl brushed the brown-haired girl's hand away and went back to the food line, fuming.

Kyla, who had also been watching the scene, met Azula's gaze. "That was mean."

"No, it was just stupid," Azula said. "They should have both watched where they were going."

Kyla shrugged. The two of them ate in silence for another minute, then Kyla looked up at her anew. "So, are you a firebender?"

Azula's lips spread into a smile. "Yes." She made a small red flame from her palm, then absorbed it. "Are you?"

Kyla smiled too. "Yeah. It's weird, because neither of my parents were. They had one of my neighbors back in Shu Cheng teach me some basics, but I didn't have a good tutor."

"You should get one while you're here," Azula said. "I have Master Kunyo. He's one of the best in the city. The upper city."

Azula's smile had widened without her realizing it. Kyla responded with a conversational nod. "That's great!"

Azula rested her arms on the table and continued. "I've been practicing fire rings for the past few weeks. That's when you spin your flames into a big loop and keep it going for as long as you can. It's supposed to build up your endurance for moves that require more power. Now I can make mine as
tall as I am and hold it up for an entire minute. Master Kunyo says that's really good - it means I'm ready for more advanced forms, so next week he'll start teaching me flame whips."

Kyla took a sip of juice from her cup and nodded.

"So what can you do?" Azula asked.

Kyla shrugged. "Just make fire, I guess. I can melt wax and toss little fireballs from one hand to the other. It's almost like I'm juggling."

"Do you know any forms?"

"No."

"Really? Well, you'll have to learn eventually. There are different levels of firebending, and the forms of each level are sort of like the gateway to mastering the moves on that level."

Kyla lifted an eyebrow. "There are levels for firebending?"

Azula nodded. "Of course! There's the first level, which is when you manipulate an external source of fire in your environment, and the second level, which is when you produce your own fire. It's important to distinguish, because each one requires you to utilize your chi in a different way. The second level has lots of its own subdivisions too, because there are different ways you can produce fire."

Kyla considered this for a moment, finally frowning. "That sounds complicated."

"I could teach you about it if you want," Azula offered. "I could show you all the forms I know. We could even practice together. I have a courtyard that's pretty big, and it's the perfect place to train."

Kyla gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Well, okay, sure!"

They sank back into silence. Azula started to wonder what else she could say. But Kyla didn't seem particularly moved by the conversation topic; she seemed content to just sit there and look around at things. In the back of her mind, Azula pondered saying more about her other tutors, perhaps slowly hinting at who she was so that Kyla would be curious enough to draw conclusions. Getting the girl interested in her wouldn't be hard - Azula was sure that from one palanquin ride, Kyla would flip out and cling to her for the rest of the school year like a perfect sidekick. But for some reason, the prospect bored her. After all, there were only so many wonders of royal life she could unveil before Kyla's commoner eyes before she ran out, and was stuck sitting silently with the girl just as she was doing now.

When it was time for the next class, she and Kyla took away their trays and followed their class group to the art room. The teacher had set up easels and paint sets for each person, and their first assignment was free-form. Azula took one of the easels at the front again, and Kyla sat at the one next to her. Azula found that she was better at drawing too, but Kyla diligently kept at it with her unpracticed hand, drawing tropical flowers and beaches, not paying anyone else any mind.

Azula and Kyla stuck together until the end of the school day, which was marked by four bangs of a gong at two o'clock. The departures were staggered by age group; the girls in the oldest level group left first, signaled by one strike, the second-oldest half an hour later, signaled by two strikes, and so on. The courtyard was almost completely empty when Azula and Kyla stepped out, the girls from the other classes pouring out alongside them. Kyla squinted at the entrance gates and suddenly perked
up. "Oh! There's my dad!" Kyla lifted her arm and waved, and Azula followed her gaze to see a man waving back at her near the entrance. She couldn't make out much of him, just similar brown hair and a smiling face. He gestured for Kyla to come over.

"He took a break from work to pick me up," Kyla explained. "We have to hurry."

Azula nodded. "Okay. Bye!"

"Bye!"

Kyla ran off. Feeling for some reason freer, Azula slowed her pace, looking around at the other girls. Some of them collected around the benches, others proceeded through the gates to walk home alone. After standing in place for a moment, she continued along the path towards the exit, starting on a session of contemplation. She was just about to step out onto the street when someone ran up from behind and took her hand. Azula whirled around, surprised to such a degree that it took her a moment to recognize her mother within the dark red cloak.

"Mom?"

Ursa lowered her hood to her shoulders, revealing her long brown hair and topknot. "Azula! Didn't you see me? I was sitting right on that bench by the two trees." She pointed back to a spot beside the building.

Azula looked askance. "Oh. I guess I wasn't paying attention... I forgot you were going to pick me up."

"That's all right." Ursa smiled and put an arm around Azula's shoulder. "So, how was your day?"

Azula shrugged. "It was okay."

"Did you make any friends?"

"One. Her name's Kyla. She was the one I was walking with, if you saw. She left with her dad just now."

Ursa smiled. "That's wonderful! What is she like?"

"Well, she's from Shu Cheng. She's a firebender. And she likes reading."

"Maybe you could invite her over sometime. You could show her the palace library."

Azula smiled. "Yeah, she'd probably love that."

Ursa looked down at the wrapped-up scroll Azula was holding. "What have you got there?"

"Oh. It's just something I drew for art class." Azula unrolled it and showed Ursa the drawing. The teacher had told them they could draw anything they wanted, as long as it was 'naturalistic'. But she hadn't known what to draw, so in the end she settled for the thing she knew best - a Fire Nation noble.

Ursa took it to examine it closer and lifted her eyebrows. "Wow. This is very good, Azula. You really have a talent for faces."

"You think so?"

"Mhm! I think we might've cancelled with your art tutor a bit too soon."
"I did draw a few people with her a while ago," Azula said. "I could show you if you want."

Ursa gave her a strange look, surprised yet smiling. "I'll always want to see what you make, darling. All you have to do is call me over!"

Azula smiled. "Yeah. I know." Ursa gave her back the scroll and she rolled it up again, taking Ursa's hand in the other.

They left the school property and made their way down the streets, backtracking along the path they had walked that morning. A silence settled over them as they walked, only now Azula noticed how it didn't make her feel desperate to fill it up as it had with Kyla. It was a feeling Azula didn't expect, since she and Ursa spent relatively little time alone together. In fact, it had always seemed that Ursa spent more time with Zuko, which Azula had always surmised was because Zuko was the firstborn, the one she had known longer. But maybe that didn't matter. She was still her daughter, after all.

"So, was the food all right?" Ursa asked, a minute later. For some reason she had taken an interest in what kinds of meals would be served in each of the prospective schools, even sending the scouts to tour the kitchens.

"Yeah, the food was great," Azula said. "I asked the cooks, and they said they used only the freshest, most seasonal vegetables, just like you wanted."

"Wonderful. You don't know how lucky you are to have your school serve food. Everyone in my school either brought their own lunch or waited till they got home."

"Really?"

"Mhm."

"That sounds like a lot of work to have to make your lunch every morning! What kind of school was it?"

"Well, it wasn't an all-girls school like this one. It had both boys and girls in one classroom."

"What was it called?"

Ursa gave a shrug. "I guess it wasn't really called anything. It was just 'school' to us."

"Oh."

Another silence settled over them, and Azula began to ponder Ursa's words. It had always seemed strange, imagining her mother as a child. From the few scattered stories Ursa had told her and Zuko, her childhood seemed to have passed like a long summer day, a haze of friendships, conversations, and adventures. And though Azula could still remember a few of those anecdotes, for some reason she never remembered hearing Ursa mention the name of her hometown or the names of her parents. In truth, it seemed almost illogical to think that she had even had them, had ever been anything other than the singular, gracefully-robed figure beside her.

"So did you tell Kyla you were the princess?" Ursa asked.

"No." Azula briefly cast her glance off to the side. "I don't want people to like me just for my title. I want them to care for who I am as a person. But if I tell them I'm the princess, that's all they'll think about when they talk to me."

"Well, it doesn't have to be that way, necessarily. If someone's a friend worth having, then they'll
value you for who you are from the beginning. And they won't change their opinion if you reveal your status.” Ursa gave a smile. "But for what it's worth, I think you made the right decision."

"Really?"

"Yes. It shows the girls that you're that kind of person too."

Azula smiled in return, and for the first time since morning, she felt uplifted.

...  

The next morning, Azula and Ursa left the palace for the second day of school. The process was similar to the first one - Ursa parted with her in the front room and Azula proceeded to her first classroom, sitting down at the same front table, where Kyla arrived a minute later. Then, a few hours later, the class got up for lunch, and Kyla and Azula went to the food line. Kyla made a passing remark about a firebending move she had recently tried to copy from a scroll, albeit unsuccessfully. Azula, who had mastered the move some months ago, began to explain her own method and her theories about why it hadn't worked for Kyla. She was cut off by the server when their turn in line came, and after Kyla had gotten her food, Azula approached her and continued.

"As I was saying, after I did it the second time, I realized that the key was to focus on timing your inhalations and exhalations with the rhythm of each fire blast. I did it the next day for Master Kunyo and he said that it came out perfectly."

But Kyla lifted a hand, looking exhausted. "It's okay, Azula, really. I was just trying to do it for fun."

Azula paused, nevertheless feeling the end of her unfinished sentence pushing its way out. "But I was just saying, if you had worked on retraining your breath first like I did, then - "

Kyla sighed again, this time impatiently. "Azula, it's okay. I get that it was easy for you and everything, but first of all, I'm not the one with a master tutor and second, I'm not trying to become a master fighter. I'm just doing it for fun."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "You can't do stuff like that for fun. You have to take it seriously."

"Well, I did it for fun."

"You can't."

Kyla lifted her eyebrows, as if in affront. "Yes, Azula. I can."

Azula kept looking at Kyla, suddenly feeling an inexplicable rise of anger mixed with frustration. She lifted her nose. "Well then you'll never be good at it."

Kyla frowned. "Says who?"

"Every professional firebender in history."

"Well, I told you, I'm not trying to be a professional."

Azula grumbled. But she was at a loss for what else to say, so she simply muttered a "Whatever," and followed Kyla to the table. The girls sat across from each other, Azula maintaining a stolid silence, but moments later it was broken as another girl appeared over Kyla's shoulder. "Hi Kyla!"

Kyla glanced at the new arrival and smiled. "Oh, hi, Ji-Lan! This is my friend, Azula."
The girl smiled. "Hi Azula!"

Azula greeted the girl, who proceeded to sit down next to Kyla. Apparently, they had met while walking to school that morning. Ji-Lan lived in the lower city and got in on merit as well. The two of them began to talk, and as if by magic, their few initial words ignited a spark of conversation. First they talked about their houses, then a play that had recently been put on in one of the lower-city theaters, which somehow both of them had seen, albeit on two separate days. Azula listened to them, playing with her chopsticks, while the girls spoke practically without pause.

"By the end of the first act, I knew something about the merchant was off," said Ji-Lan. "There was just no way he could have known all of those things if he hadn't been in on the plan."

"Yeah, I had a feeling like that too, but it took me a bit longer to come around to believing it," Kyla replied. Then she lowered her voice. "Also, I thought the actor who played him was really cute."

Ji-Lan lifted her eyebrows. "Really? So did I!"

Kyla clapped her hands together and the two girls began to giggle, blushing.

"I like plays," Azula spoke up. "My parents take us to see *Love Amongst Dragons* every year. We go to Ember Island on vacation."

Ji-Lan looked at her. "Ember Island? Nice!"

"Where is that?" asked Kyla.

"It's off the northwestern coast," said Azula.

"It's a really popular resort," Ji-Lan added. "The Fire Lord even owns a house there."

Azula smiled slightly. Technically, it wasn't Azulon's house; it had been built by her father and was occupied mainly by them, though it was still considered property of the entire royal household. She was debating on whether or not to point this out, but the girls kept talking.

"So, the people who take vacations there are mostly nobles?" Kyla asked.

"Well, not really," Ji-Lan continued. "I mean, there are a lot of nobles, but there are plenty of regular people, too. They even have umbrellas and chairs that you can rent out and use for a whole day if you don't have your own."

"Wow! Maybe I should get my parents to go sometime."

"Yeah, totally!"

Soon after, the lunch break ended. Kyla and Ji-Lan stood up with their trays, and although they waited for Azula to join them near the exit, she found it much too easy to hang back and listen to them talk. Then Ji-Lan left to go with another class group, and Kyla returned to Azula's side. The entrancing spell broke, and the silence returned, and they spent the rest of their classes together exchanging their usual sparse words.

The next day, Azula decided to do something before her alliance with Kyla could cement into a routine. She sat at a desk two rows back in their morning classroom, hoping it would pass as a casual change of seating. The other girls didn't seem to mind and rearranged themselves around her, but when Kyla arrived a few minutes later, she looked at Azula in puzzlement. "Why are you sitting there?"
"I think I see better here," Azula said.

"Oh. Well, okay. I'll stay at the front then, if that's all right with you."

"No problem!"

Azula watched Kyla sit down at the front, sighing inwardly. The remark about her vision was a lie, of course; she desperately wanted to be at the front, for it was where she could concentrate the best. Instead, another girl took Azula's old spot, and Azula ended up being joined by one of the twins, who immediately turned herself around towards her two sisters and began to whisper. The black-haired girl who had gotten her clothes ruined arrived shortly after, taking the table in front of Azula. Not casting so much as a wayward glance, she opened a book and began to read. The twins kept chatting, their voices growing loud, until finally, the black-haired girl turned around to them.

"Could you be a little quieter? I'm trying to read!"

The twin who was sitting next to Azula scowled. "You're not supposed to be reading in here! This is math class."

But the other twin bit her lip. "Come on, Lo, she could be right. The teacher will come in soon. We shouldn't get too loud."

"Whatever, Lee."

Azula had to smile. Lo and Li were two old ladies at the palace, known despite their lack of bending abilities as masters of the firebending art. She turned around, wanting to get a closer look at the girls. They were identical, but Lee's braid was a bit longer. Suddenly, Azula's mind made a connection - Lee was the same girl who had done that cartwheel. Even as Azula observed her now, she noticed that Lee seemed different from her sister. She was sitting with a better posture and her motions were more fluid and relaxed.

That day, at recess hour, Azula sought out Lee and found her for once alone, doing some balancing poses beneath a tree. After a moment of inward debate, Azula finally gathered up her willpower and approached her. "Hi. Would you mind showing me how you did that handstand? That scorpion pose in the cafeteria?"

Lee's face brightened. "Would I?" She clasped her hands together in elation then stepped back a few paces. "All right, here it comes!" She did the move, lightly and effortlessly, and when she landed back on her feet and drew herself upright, Azula smiled.

"You're very good!"

Lee smiled back. "Thanks!" She looked over her shoulder. "My sisters think I'm overdoing it. But I keep trying to teach them."

"You're Lee, right?" Azula ventured. "I heard you and your sisters talking in calligraphy class. Her name was Lo?"

The girl smiled. "Almost. I'm Ty-Lee. My sister is Ty-Lo. But we call each other Lo and Lee sometimes because it's shorter. What's your name?"

"Azula."

"A-zu-la." Ty-Lee brightened. "Hey, just like Fire Lord Azulon!"
Azula smiled. "That's right."

Ty-Lee tilted her head. "I wish my parents were creative like that. They had seven chances to come up with something nice, but they seem to like keeping things simple."

"What are your other sisters called?"

"Well, there's Ty-Min, Ty-Lin, and Ty-Wu, but they went to the other class group. Here it's just me, Ty-Lo, Ty-Lan, and Ty-La." She shrugged. "I'm the second youngest. Ty-La was born a minute after me."

Azula covered a smile with her hand. "Wow. That's a big family. I just have an older brother."

Ty-Lee smiled. "I wish I had a brother." A moment later, she crinkled her nose comically. "Not six of them, though!"

Both girls burst into laughter.

At that point, one of the teachers banged a gong four times to call everyone back to class.

Ty-Lee turned. "You're in art class with me, aren't you? Let's sit together!"

"Sure!" Azula said.

They went into drawing class, where the teacher had set up easels for pairs of two. Azula and Ty-Lee collaborated on a drawing of a wacky platypus-bear. Azula gave him Fire Lord Azulon's hair and beard, and Ty-Lee added a pink dress and a polka-dotted tail. They could hardly contain their giggles. The teacher passed by them and pressed a finger to her lips, which only made them giggle harder.

Meanwhile, the teacher continued towards the back of the room and stopped beside the black-haired girl, who sat alone. "It appears you don't have a partner." She looked at the class list. "Ah, I see. Min is out sick, so tomorrow you'll be paired with someone else. Or do you want to join a group now?"

"No, thank you," the girl answered. "I'm fine."

Recognizing her voice, Azula looked askance and watched the girl paint for a moment. Once it was time to leave class, the teacher walked around the easels and gave everyone a grade. The paintings were mostly basic and sloppy, and received mediocre '2's or '3's. But as the class left the room, Azula passed by the dark-haired girl's easel and looked at her drawing, which had been marked with the number '5', the highest possible. She had drawn a roaring dragon, with glistening scales and a rippling snarl.

Beside her, Ty-Lee gave a quiet gasp. "Wow. That's really good."

Azula nodded in agreement.

... 

The next day, Azula sat with Ty-Lee during their morning lessons and met with her during the recess hour. Ty-Lee didn't pester her with questions about her status, but on the other hand took a great interest in miscellaneous details from Azula's life. She smiled in a sisterly way when Azula told her about her own gymnastic training and laughed when Azula described the habits of their resident turtle duck family.
In turn, Azula found out that Ty-Lee was the daughter of a businessman whose ancestor was notable for a service to the Fire Lord. Her father now managed a circuit of factories, from which he earned a fortune. Ty-Lee had the habit of bending over backwards and standing in a bridge pose as she talked, or rolling up her legs and planting her feet onto her head when she was lying on her stomach. Even Azula, who was normally praised by her trainers for being flexible, couldn't quite manage to copy her. But instead of rubbing it in Azula's face, Ty-Lee encouraged her to try and praised what she could do.

When Ty-Lee was with her sisters, however, she was absorbed into a posse of pink clothes and brown hair. The sisters all seemed to want to stick together and expected Ty-Lee to do the same. And although Azula could tell that Ty-Lee was trying distance herself from them by developing her unique ability, habit was a hard thing to break. One day, after school, Ty-Lee called all of them over in the front yard and introduced them to Azula. Up close, the resemblance between the girls was almost unearthly. Six copies of Ty-Lee stood beside her, wearing identical smiles.

"I'm Ty-Lan," said the first one.

"I'm Ty-Wu!"

On and on it went, until the last girl finally declared: "And I'm Ty-La."

They surrounded Ty-Lee like a bouquet of identical flowers, momentarily making her vanish. Had Azula not known which one Ty-Lee was, she couldn't have been able to tell. And right as Azula looked at her, Ty-Lee's smile faded somewhat into resigned acceptance, as if to say: Well, I guess this is how it is.

Unexpectedly, Azula felt a stir of empathy inside of her. She had never thought of herself as a wallflower, but suddenly she remembered all of those times she had been alone, or walking with Ursa and Zuko, or swallowed in a sea of nobles at some royal celebration. Her uncle and cousin always enjoyed everyone's recognition first, including the Fire Lord's, while her father stood back, just Azulon's second son and not much else. Technically, in royal terms, she wasn't all that high up. Often, during bad days, she even felt like nothing at all. But if Ty-Lee had the strength to do something about it, why couldn't she?

... Three weeks passed. Azula continued to hang out with Ty-Lee during free periods and sit with Kyla at lunch. They did this out of pure habit, though the more time that passed, the clearer it became to Azula that she and Kyla had nothing in common. She spent her recess hours and afternoons with Ty-Lee, while Kyla had found herself a group of other girls with whom she did the same. So now, Azula's conversations with Kyla touched upon lessons, teachers, then went dry. Soon, Kyla's new friends started drifting over to their lunch table, and Azula increasingly found herself falling passively silent, listening to a bunch of meaningless chatter about books, pets, and happy home lives.

At one point, Azula looked over her shoulder and found the dark-haired girl sitting in her usual lonely place by the window. Ever since Azula had seen the dragon she drew, she had begun to harbor an interest for her. At first, the girl had seemed antisocial and withdrawn - a detrimental and unappealing combination. But now, Azula was starting to wonder if it was just an illusion. Maybe she was just in the wrong company for her true colors to show.

During the next day's lunch hour, Kyla, Ji-Lan, and the other girls entered a stimulating conversation that began even as they left the food line. They seemed sufficiently occupied, so Azula discreetly stepped away from them and made her way to the place where the quiet girl sat. She put down her plate and waited. Sure enough, when more people started coming back from the food line, the girl...
appeared. But when she noticed Azula, she stopped. All other areas were crowded and noisy, so she finally gave in and sat down on the opposite side, a few seats away. The gesture made Azula smile.

The girl began to eat, and Azula let the silence stretch for a while before turning to her. "I don't bite, you know. You may sit by me. If you want to avoid people, then school isn't really a good place to do it."

The girl regarded her with uninterested eyes. "Maybe I'm not trying to avoid people. Maybe I just don't feel a need to follow them around everywhere."

Azula briefly looked askance at Kyla's table. "I wish I could be like that."

The girl scowled. "What, were you hoping I'd teach you or something?"

"No. I was just saying."

The girl was silent for a moment. "Then why did you suddenly decide to move from there to here? Did you want to check to see if I could speak, or ask me why I'm so mad all the time?"

Her sudden rise in anger made Azula frown. "No. I'm just trying to meet new people."

The girl shook her head. "Look, I know who I want to be friends with and who I don't. I don't need you to pity me."

"I wasn't pitying you," Azula said. Then she paused. "Well, okay, maybe I was, a little. But that's only because I know that I could have used a friend on my first day here. And I noticed that you didn't have any."

"Well, maybe that's the way I want it."

"Why?"

The girl lifted her head. "Because I don't even want to be here!" she blurted. "How would you feel if your parents made every single decision for you your whole life and just sent you off whenever they felt like to make you into someone they want you to be? This place is just an extension of that. Everyone here's all perfect and nice and and we're supposed to come out of here as proper young ladies, but that's not who I am! And I'm not going to try to be."

"You don't have to," Azula said. "You should just be you and make other people respect you for it." She gave a moment's pause. "And to be honest, I wasn't so sure about going here either, at first. My parents wanted to expose me more to society because they felt like I was too cooped up in the house."

The girl sucked up some noodles from her bowl, lifting an eyebrow. "Did you have private tutors or something?"

"Yeah. I had to give them up to come here. But I didn't want to at first. With them, it was like I had them to myself, and I could tell they cared about me. But here, the teachers probably see dozens of girls every day. And then every year the class groups change, and the old girls are replaced with new ones."

The girl snorted. "Yeah. It's like a factory."

The image that came to mind was so becoming to the situation that Azula laughed aloud. "No kidding!"
"The factory of mass manner production."

Azula giggled. A pause fell over them. "Where did you learn to draw?" she asked.

The girl looked up. "Huh?"

"Where did you learn to draw? Ty-Lee and I saw the dragon you drew. It was really good."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess. But I never learned or anything. I just draw as a hobby." She paused. "Is Ty-Lee the acrobat girl?"

"Yeah. She's sorry she kicked you."

"It's okay. I hated that vest, anyway. My mom forced me to wear it because she was practically in love with it. Then she got a big surprise when I came home." The girl smiled. "I'm Mai, by the way."

"I'm Azula." After a moment, Mai rose with her tray and sat down across from Azula. They continued to eat, silently. Right then, lunch period ended, and everyone started getting up to go to recess. Azula and Mai trailed towards the exit, when suddenly, Ty-Lee came up to them.

"Hey Azula, are you ready to do those moves now?"

Azula smiled. "Yeah, let's go!"

Ty-Lee glanced at Mai. "Oh. Hey there."

"Hi."

"I'm Ty-Lee. Sorry about the whole pushing thing!"

"I'm Mai. And it's okay." She gave a small smile.

Ty-Lee clapped her hands together. "Great! Um, so Azula and I were just going to do some acrobatics. Want to join us?"

"Sure. I think I'll just watch, though. I'm not really a sports person."

"All right, whatever you want!"

The three of them went outside, hurrying over to the shady spot beneath Ty-Lee's tree. Azula showed Ty-Lee the moves she had learned from her trainers, and in return Ty-Lee showed her poses she had made up on her own, which resulted in a silly scene of flips, handstands, and upside-down faces. Mai sat in the grass and watched them for a while, her face now alive with interest and humor. At one point, Ty-Lee stood upright and glanced up at some flowers that were blooming on the branches. She tapped Azula on the shoulder.

"Hey, let's try to climb up and pick one of those!"

"Sure!"

"I bet I can get there first!" Ty-Lee immediately rushed over to the tree and pulled herself up to the first branch. Azula was about to follow her, but suddenly she heard a metallic ching and saw something fall down in the corner of her eye. She turned, and saw Mai standing up, a fallen branch with a flower lying at her feet.
Ty-Lee looked over to Mai a moment later, blinking in puzzlement. "Huh?"

"Beat you to it." Mai smirked. She picked up the leafy branch and showed it to them.

"How did you do that?" asked Azula.

"I used this." Mai picked up something shiny from the ground. Azula saw that it was a small razor, round and thin, with jagged edges.

Ty-Lee looked at it with widened eyes. "Whoa!"

"Is that another hobby of yours?" Azula asked.

"Yep. Staring at a blank wall all day is better when you can throw stuff at it."

Azula giggled. "I used to draw on my walls with firebending."

Mai laughed. "Nice!"

"It made Mom and the servants really angry. But then I started doing it just to annoy them."

Mai pocketed the razor. "See, I'd throw these to annoy my parents too, but then they'd freak out and send me to correctional school. So I just do it when I'm alone." She looked at Ty-Lee. "You're probably the center of attention at home, though."

Ty-Lee sighed. "Not really. There are seven of us, so my parents don't really notice the small stuff anymore. But that's okay. Just being able to do this is enough for me." She got down into a bridge pose and peeked out at them from between her arms. "Hi!"

Azula and Mai giggled.

Several days passed, and each of them seemed to reveal something new about the two girls, solidifying Azula's earlier intuition of kinship with them. In turn, it seemed like they had the same feeling about her, which was all the more surprising since Azula had never strained herself to achieve it. Despite their different upbringings, she, Mai, and Ty-Lee had all shared some similar experiences, including being a part of noble families. And though Azula was never pressed to broach the topic of royalty, she didn't feel like she was hiding anything about her identity anymore. With them, Azula felt for the first time like she had equals, and it wasn't the demeaning feeling she had long ago thought it would be. It felt nice, and it felt right, just like the friendships from her mother's old stories had seemed. Soon, Azula began to look forward to each new school day, sometimes even choosing to walk home without Ursa, instead spending extra time with Mai and Ty-Lee wandering the school territory.

Azula was so absorbed in her newfound delight that she paid attention to little else. Then, one day, when she was about to leave the front yard to walk home, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Azula turned around, and to her surprise, she saw Kyla standing there. Her arms were casually crossed, but her face clouded with its familiar puzzled frown.

"Hi, can I talk to you?"

Azula paused for a moment, feeling a sensation of dread that she couldn't explain. "Yes?"

"Are you mad at me or something?" Kyla asked. "It seems like you're avoiding me. A few weeks
ago you just took off during lunch and now you always sit with that quiet girl."

Azula frowned. "So? I'm meeting new people. You're doing the same thing."

"No I'm not. Because when I meet a new friend, I don't just toss the old ones out the window."

Azula paused. Silence flooded in, then she spoke up, though quieter. "What makes you think I'm doing that to you?"

"Well, you never say hi to me," Kyla continued. "You don't even look at me when I pass by you, even when I wave to you. You laughed when I spilled paint on my skirt in art class."

"Everyone did," Azula said. "It was funny. It doesn't mean anything."

"I wouldn't have laughed at you if it happened to you," Kyla said. "Anyways, that's not the point. My point is, you basically act like you don't even want to know me anymore."

Azula didn't respond. In fact, this was somewhat true, but she had just been unsure of how to say it. With Kyla, everything was boring. She had constantly felt like she had spent her life being interested in the wrong things: firebending, training, politics. And she loved explaining these things to people, telling them tidbits of what she was thinking or learning, which Kyla and the others seemed to interpret as lecturing. It made Azula angry, though she couldn't figure out the reason. All she knew was that with them, she had felt chained to the ground, when in reality she wanted desperately to fly.

"I didn't hear an answer," Kyla said.

"To what?"

"Do you want to be my friend or not?"

Kyla's hands were on her hips. Azula fell into a long pause, staring at her in disbelief. The question seemed so petty. And yet, the girl was serious. Azula weighed her options, and finally decided to keep it simple, so as not to get tangled up in the mess any further.

"No," she said.

The effect wasn't what Azula had been expecting. Kyla lifted her eyebrows and blinked, as if slapped, then lifted her chin. "Fine, then. Goodbye." She whipped her head around and stormed away.

Azula went home with her mind in knots. She had told the girl the truth. Wasn't that better than lying? Or did the rules of society dictate that you had to sugarcoat everything, even if you risked implying something you didn't mean? Azula never imagined that she could be in such a situation. She was a Fire Nation princess. If anyone knew etiquette, it was her.

So why had her efforts with Kyla crumbled?

Azula thought it over for hours, then finally, at the end of the day, she burst into Ursa's room and told her what had happened.

Ursa responded with a frown. "Do you enjoy spending time with her?"

"No!" Azula blurted. "She's boring! I'm not interested in the things she is and sometimes it seems like she doesn't care about anything I have to say! Mai and Ty-Lee are much better!"

"Then why force yourself to spend time with Kyla?"
"That's what I tried to tell her!" Azula said.

Ursa gave a smile. "Well, then you probably just put it a little too bluntly. Being a friend to someone doesn't have to mean spending every second with them or sharing all of their interests. It could just mean saying hello or having a short conversation every now and then. Then, if you two really have nothing in common, you'll drift apart on your own. No hurt feelings."

Azula crossed her arms. "Well, too bad I didn't know that before. Now she thinks I'm mean."

Ursa leaned over and cupped her hands around Azula's face. "Well, you and I both know that that's not true. You're my strong, willful girl, and you know what you want. If she ever gives you any trouble, just take it in stride and respond to her calmly. "An apology could also help."

Azula kept looking at Ursa and smiled. They sat together for a few more minutes in the spacious bedroom, until one of her mother's servants came and asked if she was ready to go to bed. But Ursa said she would wait for a little while, then walked Azula back to her own room first.

Azula took Ursa's advice and began to think about how she would apologize to Kyla. She decided that she would approach as gracefully as her mother would, like a true princess, being the sun that cast rays of peace to its surroundings. And from that point on, the entire school would exist in harmony.

She didn't want to risk a failure due to Kyla's temper, so she decided to wait a few days until she reasoned Kyla had cooled down. Then, the next week, she mustered up her resolve and set out for school, assembling the right words in her mind.

The front yard of the building was crowded with students, and Kyla was standing off to the side, encircled by her friends. When she met eyes with Azula, she primly turned away. Azula smiled it off and continued walking, imagining light emanating from her silhouette and brightening everything around her. She approached Mai, who was standing by the closed doors, and began to talk to her. Nearby, Ty-Lee was standing with her posse of sisters and waved to them in greeting.

"Why doesn't she hang out more with us?" Mai wondered. "It's like she's glued to them."

"It's okay, don't be mad at her," said Azula. "She's probably just trying to make it up to them because she spends so much time with us now. Think about it - they've been together for their entire lives, and now she suddenly got friends of her own. That's probably jarring for them."

Mai considered this and nodded. "Huh. Well, I definitely wouldn't have thought of that... But I guess it makes sense." She smiled a little. "Though if it were me, I think I'd go crazy."

Azula shrugged. "Well, everyone's different."

In class, Azula sat near Mai and Ty-Lee, and at lunch, the three of them went to their new official table by the window. Mai had brought a deck of cards, and after a quick game with Ty-Lee, the three of them began to stack them into whimsical towers. Azula peered over her shoulder to Kyla's table, and after a moment, she rose from her seat a little. But after a pause, she sat back down. No, it still didn't feel right... Kyla's expression still seemed like it could be harboring anger. Azula thought of getting Mai and Ty-Lee to back her up, and began to deliberate the pros and cons of that, falling quiet while the two girls talked. Then, Ty-Lee started telling a funny story, and Azula became occupied with listening to her. Then lunch ended.
Three more days passed, then the week ended, and by the time Azula came back the next school day, she reasoned that it was too late. She had already spent too much time mulling it over, and suddenly apologizing now, out of the blue, would seem random and idiotic. Finally, she decided to simply let things blow over on their own, and show Kyla her benevolence in other ways. That way, Kyla could see that even though Azula had chosen different people as friends, she was still kind and considerate to everyone.

For one thing, Azula had noticed at one point that Kyla had trouble drawing animals. So one day in art class, she took her pencil to Kyla's easel and did a quick sketch of an ostrich-horse. "Look, this is how you do it. You want the shading to make it look like there's a natural source of light."

Kyla moved her easel away. "Well, I don't care. I do them like this."

Azula sighed and went back to her own.

On another day, during music lessons, she and Kyla were both assigned to the group of horn players for a rendition of the national anthem. Azula showed them all a breath trick she had learned from a palace music man that he used to play louder. In response, Kyla sighed.

"We're not supposed to play loud," she said. "We'll drown out everyone else."

"Yeah, but then the teacher will see how well we can play and give us better marks," Azula said. "We'll be the best music group."

"Well this isn't a competition. This is teamwork, in case that term isn't familiar to you."

The hostility in her tone made Azula freeze for a moment. But a few other girls began to try her described technique and marvel at the results, which brought the smile back to her face. Convinced that Kyla only needed some time to warm up, Azula continued to give her little nudges here and there. She began to talk about firebending during recess, showing the other benders the moves she had mastered and getting them to try them out. She offered everyone assistance during math classes, explaining the solutions in detail, ignoring Kyla's and Ji-Lan's roll of the eyes and comments that the class already had a teacher and didn't need another one.

Finally, in a hardly-noticeable final jump, they reached the last week before winter recess. As a parting tradition, the teachers organized a field day for the lowest level group. They split each class group into two teams and had them all compete against each other in a series of games. By a brilliant stroke of luck, Azula's team consisted of Mai, Ty-Lee, Kyla, and four other girls. Together, they went around the classrooms and courtyards for various activities. Ty-Lee excelled at the obstacle course, Mai at dart-throwing.

But the last and best game was something called Shipwreck, which they played in the grassy back field. Each of the six teams started on one edge of the playing field and was given the same assortment of objects - a jumprope, a floor mat, a chair, and other miscellany, all of which were presumed to be buoyant, remnants of a splintered and sinking Fire Nation ship. The grass of the field was considered to be the sea, and the goal of the game was to transport everybody and all the objects to the other side of the field without setting foot on the grass. The team that got to the other end first won.

Azula had never played the game before but fell in love with it instantly. She felt a surge of inspiration and desire, and while Kyla and the other girls calmly examined the objects and began to mumble ideas, she began to calculate a strategy. Finally she approached them and cut off their developing conversation, holding out her hands.
"All right, this is how we'll do it," she said. "We take the floor mat and put everyone on it holding all the objects. Then one person takes the chair and puts it as far forward as she can. Then someone hands her the jump rope and she tosses it forward and steps onto it. Then we all leave the floor mat one by one and-

"Wait, I have a different idea," said one of the girls. "I think we should all get on the mat, with each person throwing one of the items forward, and then we all find something to stand or sit on while one of us moves the mat."

"But that's slower," Azula said. "We'd be wasting time deciding who goes where, and then we'd have to find a way to collect everything without stepping on the grass. My way's better."

"Well, we should give both a chance," said the girl.

Azula shook her head impatiently and went to pick up the mat. "No, we can't! Look, two of the teams started already! If we don't hurry, we won't be able to gain enough ground on them!"

Kyla slapped her hands to her head and gave a loud groan. "Oh for the heavens' sake, will you stop? Just stop! It's just a game! It's not the end of the world if we lose! Stop bossing us around!"

Azula frowned at her. "So you'd rather lose?"

Kyla curled her hands into fists. "Who cares? Why can't we just play? Why does everything have to be about winning or losing for you?"

"The teachers said this game was a race. In case that term isn't familiar to you. It means that we have to try to be the first team to reach the finish line. Otherwise we won't be following directions!"

Kyla scoffed. "Yeah, I see how you 'follow directions'! Miss Master Firebender and master math student and best artist and top-of-the-class genius. You want to be the best at everything and you want all the teachers' praise, while the rest of us follow your every move like your perfect little minions. You're a control freak. You're like a machine!"

Shock coursed through Azula like a jolt of lightning. For the first time in her life, she felt a strange sensation, as if the words had smacked into her face and seeped through her skin. She was sure she could even feel a sting in her cheeks. For a frightening moment she couldn't make a sound, but then finally she managed to stir herself into speech. "I'm not a machine," she said.

"Yes you are!" said Kyla. "You're a selfish little analyzer machine who wants the world to pat her on the head and do nothing but tell her how perfect she is. Well, sorry to break it to you, but no one cares! Believe it or not, but the rest of us don't care how awesome you think you are and we don't need to win all the time like you do. We're perfectly happy with the way we are, because we're human."

A girl beside her nodded. "And we don't need you to nag us all the time like you're our mother or something. Just grow up."

Azula stood there, staring at the group of girls, unable to do anything else but take in the emotions on all of their faces - anger, annoyance, impatience - which suddenly stood out so clear and stark to her that it seemed like they would flood her like a tidal wave. But right then, Ty-Lee stepped forward. "Azula is not a machine, and she's not nagging you! She's just trying to help us win because it's a game. It's a strategy game, and if we're not working on developing our strategy skills, then we're not really doing anything, are we? You should be happy that Azula tries to help. She's a thinker, and that's what sets her apart. She's unique. And I'm unique too!" Ty-Lee pointed to Mai. "Mai's unique
Mai narrowed her eyes at the girls. "Just because someone's not the person you want them to be doesn't mean they're any worse than you. Hate to break it to you, but we're not all perfect little flower girls and we don't want to be."

Azula couldn't speak. Mai, Ty-Lee, and the other girls just stood there in place, staring each other down. Then suddenly, from somewhere far away, people began to cheer. A team of girls had reached the finish line and was skipping around and clapping, celebrating their victory. The teachers congratulated them, and everyone else began to turn their equipment in and disperse. Kyla turned away, gathering up some equipment, and walked off. The other girls followed behind, leaving Azula, Mai, and Ty-Lee alone. The two girls stood at her either side, then turned around to leave in the opposite direction. Azula went with them, and it was only when they reached the building that she found her voice.

"Thanks," she said to them.

Ty-Lee gave her a hearty clap on the shoulder. "No problem!"

"I never liked them, to be honest," said Mai. "They're so full of themselves."

They walked out into the courtyard and approached the gates. Azula took a while to think something over, then turned around to them and stopped. "I'm not going to be at school tomorrow. I have to do some stuff with my mom. But wait for me here after classes get out and I'll come pick you up. We can all go play at my house."

Ty-Lee nodded. "Sure! My parents probably won't even notice I'm gone."

Mai nodded too. "I can probably get out of doing more music lessons." She stuck out her tongue. "Boring."

Azula smiled. "Okay. Then wait for me." She clasped each of their hands, and went off.

When she got home, she went to her mother's room and told her what she was planning. Ursa responded with a sly smile. They would make it their little secret.

The next afternoon, both of them got into a palanquin and had the procession of bearers escort them to the school. They reached the building with the courtyard already full with younger students. Some of the girls looked askance as the large veiled palanquin made its way to them, and reacted with gasps and whispers, tapping their friends' shoulders. The procession reached the gates and the palanquin was lowered to the ground.

One of the guards ran forward. "Make way! Make way for Princess Ursa and Princess Azula!"

The pink curtains were pulled open. Azula stepped out of the palanquin in royal dress, her mother following closely behind, and they walked out amid the bowing guards. The girls in the courtyard gaped. The teachers who stood at the sides watched with stoic faces, their hands folded in front of them. Azula walked forward, till two faces stood out to her from the crowd — one, a peppy girl with a long braid, the other, a calm, pale, black-haired girl. She walked up to them and stopped.

"Mai and Ty-Lee, it would honor me if you would come visit my house and spend the afternoon with me. The servants have finished gardening and we'll have the courtyard all to ourselves."

The girls' eyes glimmered. Slowly, Mai linked her hands together and bowed, and Ty-Lee followed suit. Then, smiling, Azula turned her back to them and held out her arms. The girls linked theirs.
through hers, and together they walked in a trio to the palanquin, none of them looking back.

Azula revealing herself as the princess caused a ripple through the community of girls. For the rest of their years there, she, Mai, and Ty-Lee occupied their own personal bubble, where no one else's words or opinions could touch them. Ty-Lee's sisters remained on the sidelines, observing in awe, happy that she had befriended someone like Azula. Other girls flocked to them, of course, but it was always at a respectful distance.

Kyla did not make any more comments towards Azula, though it was clear that her opinions hadn't changed. Only now, Azula found that she no longer cared. She had sifted two best friends from the confused clump - Mai, the quiet, artistic girl who could throw daggers, and Ty-Lee, the bubbly acrobat with a kind confidence. Over the months, their bond only tightened, and pretty soon, the three of them became inseparable. Azula had friends who liked her for the person she was. And that, she realized, was all she had ever needed.
Drifting Unhinged

After what seemed like forever, Azula opened her eyes. Bright lamplight streamed into her vision, and after a moment she recognized the plain white ceiling of the bedroom. She was lying in bed again, her arms folded over her chest, with a new, tan-colored blanket wrapped around her body. At first, it seemed like she had somehow accidentally contorted herself this way, but as she tried to move her arms and legs, she found that the blanket didn't let her. The fabric was strangely heavy and unyielding, encasing her in a firm cocoon. On top of that, the familiar black bands of the bed were pulled taut over it, holding her firmly down.

A brief, dull headache pulsed through her confusion, and after a moment, Azula remembered what had happened. She was alone. She was on an island, possibly thousands of miles away from the mainland, surrounded by a random team of careless nurses, under the care of some doctor who likely didn't even intend to practice medicine. Their function was to guard her. To contain her.

Azula laid her head back down on the pillow, slamming her eyes shut. Those memories from her old school days were still surfacing in her mind, joined by dozens of later ones, all perfectly preserved like insects in amber. She could still see everyone's faces, remember the exact tone of their voices, as if they were standing right in front of her again.

"Yes, you are! You're a selfish little analyzer machine."

"What is wrong with that child?"

"Guess you wouldn't understand, would you? Because you're just so perfect…"

All of it amounted to the same thing.

She had been a ruin all along, just using her imagined perfection to cover it up. She had played a constant game of striving and self-bettering, thinking that she was building up some sort of tower of strength inside of herself, while in reality, she had just been piling up a mound of sand. She might have thought that she had been making progress, that all of those training sessions and fights were like stepping stones on the way to her goal, but all they had done was distract her from the truth.

They had been right. Every single one of them. Looking inside of herself, Azula could feel no other desire than to get revenge on the world, to make everyone that had ever caused her pain suffer ten times more. If she had been sent back in time that very moment, she would have rocketed out of the palace in front of Ursa's eyes and never come back. She would have slapped Kyla in the face. She would have given Mai the cold shoulder at the Boiling Rock and dismissed her and Ty-Lee from her service without wasting a single fire blast on them. That was what they deserved. But now that Azula thought about it, she realized that even if she had never confronted Mai and Ty-Lee about their betrayal directly, it would still have only been a matter of time before they realized who she really was. Was it really an accident that everyone she had ever been close to eventually formed the same opinion about her?

Azula knew it wasn't. She had just been the last person to realize it. She had always had problems… she hadn't even been able to say "I love you" to Ursa properly - directly - back when the other daughters had spewed the phrase like babbling brooks. Perhaps that was one of the things that had led Ursa to her conclusion. Along with everyone else. Maybe she really did belong in a mental hospital... then, in that case Zuko had demonstrated the greatest feat of forward thinking in history. She was a machine, and a defunct one at that.
Azula sighed and turned her head to the side. After a moment, her gaze alighted on the Phoenix King helmet that stood on the bookshelf, glinting under the ceiling light. She looked at it for a moment, tracing the outline of the bird's wings, lingering on the plates of pure gold that adorned the metal frame, which was already starting to collect dust.

At least she hadn't been the only one to take the fall. Something greater had ended that day — something she had just been unfortunate enough to take part in. No matter what, there would still be no more palaces, no more personal servants, no more plans and missions to constantly think about. And not just for her, but for many others. Not the least of them her father.

Azula could still picture him standing before her that final time, face smiling and serene, yet his eyes firm with resolve. Then he had said that thing, that one short sentence that had mysteriously caused her escalating despair to calm, her defenses to briefly disarm.

"It is a special job that I can only entrust to you."

But had he really meant it? Hadn't she felt it, the moment he had put on that helmet, that he had always intended to do things alone? When it came down to it, she had been little more than a tool for him, doing the grunt work while he sat around in the palace and reaped all the benefits. He always summoned her formally, praised her publicly, and in the increasingly rare occasions that they were alone, the talk was all goals, strategies, achievements. And now, suddenly, all of his boasting of her during galas and public meetings was starting to seem like the flaunting of some hawk breeder who had crossed the perfect specimen. He had used her, just like she had used other people, because she had had a power that he needed. Azula scowled in spite. Her father probably thought her every bit of the monster that Ursa had. But instead of flinching away from her abnormalities in disgust, he had nurtured them. Cultivated them. Then in the end he had discarded her. And she had fallen.

Azula drew in a breath, feeling her eyes well with tears. But she wouldn't cry. Not for him. Not for anyone, ever again.

... 

After an uneventful span of time, a quiet wooden creak pierced the silence. Azula's gaze glumly drifted over to the entrance, just as the door to the bedroom drifted open, revealing Isla carrying a tray of food. The nurse pulled a chair over to Azula's bedside and sat down, digging a spoon into a steaming bowl of rice. She scooped some out, blew on it, then brought it to Azula's mouth. Azula silently turned her head away.

Isla's hand followed her, but Azula turned away again, and after a few more rounds of chase, Isla finally gave up and slapped the spoon down in exasperation. "Fine. Starve." She put the tray back onto the counter and left the room.

A minute later, she returned with a number of IV bags filled with purple serum. She removed the empty fluid bag from the bedside pole and replaced it with a fresh one, then checked the various tubes and wires that were snaking out like vines from under the neck of the cocoon-blanket. Then she began to dust the counter and cabinets, opening and closing doors, then moved on to wiping the floor.

When the room was finally spotless, Isla came back to the counter and picked up the tray again. "Have you made up your mind yet?"

Azula looked away darkly.

The nurse came closer and sat down. "Come on. Eat." She scooped up some rice and brought the
spoon to Azula's mouth. Azula silently accepted it and began to chew lethargically. She made the first swallow, then Isla gave her the second spoon, and she swallowed that one too. For the third one, however, Azula moved her mouth away.

Isla sighed. "What's wrong?"

Azula grumbled. "Tying me up. Feeding me like an animal."

"You've been put in the straitjacket for your own protection," Isla said. "The longer you keep having these outbursts, the more you'll be kept like this in the future. So for your sake, please, open your mouth."

She brought the spoon forward again, and Azula snatched it out of her hand with her teeth and flung it to the floor. "I said, no!"

Isla narrowed her eyes. "Fine." She left the room. A few moments later, she came back with another bag in her hands, this one larger and filled with clear liquid. "You get liquid nutrients, then." She snapped on a pair of rubber gloves, dabbed Azula's neck with a wet gauze pad, and without warning, stuck a large, sharp needle into her neck. Azula gave a yelp, flinching as she felt something long and sharp pierce through the muscle, entering some deep and vital location where it caused a burning pain. Azula began to squirm, and when Isla stepped back, she snarled.

"Come near me again and I'll tear you to shreds!" Azula swung her head from side-to-side, but with the rest of her body trapped by the cocoon, she couldn't do much besides rock herself around. Face still impassive, Isla leaned down to a lower cabinet and took out a small, C-shaped pillow, which she promptly fitted around Azula's neck. The pillow was thick and firm, and braced her head so that she couldn't move it in either direction. Isla fixed it into place, leaned down to pick up the fallen spoon from under the bed, then left the room.

Azula imagined how pathetic she must have looked and welled with hatred. She began to breathe rapidly again, trying to shoot fire from her mouth, not caring if she burned the blanket and herself with it. But as always, nothing came out.

She continued to fidget, pushing against the straitjacket to the point of exhaustion. After several minutes of getting nowhere, her strength finally broke and she settled down, catching her breath. She lay still for a few minutes, staring up at the ceiling. The pain from the needle had gone, but she could still feel it lodged inside of her, protruding out, connecting her to the pouch of nutrients that hung overhead.

They had made her a cripple. A sick, pathetic, raging vegetable. The stronger Azula's anger grew, the more she could sense the humiliation that was bubbling up beneath it. Humiliation before her own self.

... Time crept by in silence. With no solid food, the nurses hardly had to come into Azula's room at all. When they did, it was always Dee and Isla, tiptoeing in to check up on all the equipment she was hooked up to and whispering medical jargon under their breaths. Then they would walk away, not casting her a spare glance. In the evening, a hand would poke in and shut off the lights, then disappear. For the rest of the time, the building was dead silent. No chatter, no movement, and only occasionally the sound of a closing door from far away.

Well, that's the end of that, Azula figured. If anything, at least she had put an end to the charade and exposed their operation for what it was. She wondered what Zuko would do when they told him.
He'd probably order them to keep watching over her, since there was probably no other place that could be considered secure enough to house her. But this time there would be no more therapy, no more kind fake smiles or playing nice. Azula was fine with that. Brutal honesty and harsh reality were rules she preferred to play by. She figured she'd still try to escape again someday, once she figured out a way to orient herself and cross the sea. Then she'd go to live in some faraway place where no one recognized her. That way, at least, she'd deprive them of the satisfaction of shaping her future. Whatever it could possibly be.

Days came and went. At first, Azula tried to keep track of them, but she lost count at four. Waking life was starting to blend in too much with her dreams, and since there was nothing remarkable about the silent, unchanging bedroom, Azula preferred to spend as much time asleep as possible. Life in one position had a way of pulling a person in. Apparently it wasn't an accident after all that her physical trainers had told her when she was young to keep moving, to not let herself laze around. By now, her body had stopped wanting to move of its own accord.

But it wasn't as if she'd need to move, anyway. She had already razed everyone's villages, stormed through all the cities, wrecked enough of everyone's plans. And she had witnessed all the general highlights of a life. Childhood, labor, friends, family... All of those experiences had played out before her like the swiftly-changing sets of a theater production. And now, all of those people and backdrops from the old times were gone, replaced by the final stage life had to offer her - a blank nothing. And she didn't care anymore how she'd spend the rest of it. Although the nurses would probably do everything at the bare minimum now, they'd still attend to her basic needs. Maybe, then, she would in fact stay here, feeding off of their labor, just so that she wouldn't have to bother about getting food and lodging for herself. Crossing the sea would take a long time. And even if she did manage to find land, there was no guarantee that it would be hospitable. Hunting was hard. Building her own house too much work. There was the option of finding some forest-dweller and forcing them to abandon their home for her, but the prospect of ever dealing with another person sickened her. If she was such a monster, such a machine, then why should she bother barging into the regular people's lives? Why not let them live in peace, in their perfect little world of love and friendship?

No, she didn't regret what she had said to Ursa... all of those things were for fools. Deceptive lies, told only by people who already enjoyed those things. But she knew the truth... And that, at the very least, would be something to be thankful for.

The lights went off a few hours later, and after several hours of confused dreams, Azula opened her eyes to find the room still dark. She was debating whether or not to drift off again, when suddenly, she heard the sound of advancing footsteps. The door opened, and the lights flickered on, revealing Isla. This time, though, she was followed by Kira, who dutifully followed her to Azula's bedside. Together, they unstrapped the cocoon, unbuckled the tiny straps that held the straitjacket together, and removed it to reveal Azula's plain red jumpsuit, along with all the IV tubes hooked up to her arms. One by one, they removed the needles, bandaged the wounds, and helped her into a seated position. Kira poured out some purple serum into a spoon and slipped it into Azula's mouth. At the same time, Isla pulled out the round wooden table from the corner and set it at the center of the room. That had to mean that Dr. Low was visiting.

Azula's heartbeat quickened. Kira rolled up the wheelchair to the side of the bed and seated Azula into it, strapping her up to the torso. Finally, she rolled her up to the table.

Isla brought the tea a few moments later, setting one cup in front of Azula and the other in front of
the empty chair. Then she placed down the sugar and silverware, and once the table was ready, she went to wait by the door. Moments later, Dr. Low walked in. Azula lowered her gaze to the placemat, which she dully picked at with her nails, until Dr. Low sat down across from her and she could no longer prolong the dread of looking up at him. He hadn’t changed a bit. Same military uniform, same hair, same lines in his face. If he had ever come seconds away from dying by her hands of electric shock, then he wasn’t showing it.

The doctor arranged his silverware to his liking, then leaned back in his chair. "How are you feeling, Azula?"

Azula looked away, chin leaned against her fists. "Fine."

Dr. Low crushed a cube of sugar into his tea and took a sip. Azula looked away from him. For a long time, they sat in silence. Azula wasn’t sure if he’d demand her to speak; she wasn’t even sure if she’d be able to find any words to say. But strangely, Dr. Low did nothing. He sat like a lonely statue, as if enveloped by the same fog she felt around herself.

Soon, the silence became unsettling. Azula turned to her tea, first playing around with the leaves, then lifting the cup for a series of slow sips. The tea was a blend of citrus fruits with a slight touch of ginger. After memories of water and vegetable mush, it was refreshing.

Azula finished the entire cup, before she finally heard a stir as Dr. Low shifted his position.

"I owe you an apology."

Azula blinked and looked up at him. "What?"

"I should have found a better way to introduce you to the situation. I underestimated the effect such a transition would have on you. I don't blame you for your reaction, and I admit it was partially my fault."

Azula stared at the doctor without speaking. Something in the fog shifted, but she was too weary to contemplate what it could mean. After a moment, she simply averted her gaze and went back to slouching.

Dr. Low gave a small smile. "Now that you know that much of the story, I might as well tell you the rest. You are indeed on an island, one that’s located about fifty miles off the western coast of the Fire Nation. It’s rather small, so it has just this building, a dock for supply ships, and some nature. That being said, your brother did order you to be placed here. After withdrawing his armies from the battle zones, the first thing he did was examine the staff he had at home and search for people who would be able to take care of you. He didn’t want to risk placing you in a regular hospital with other patients, so he decided to find an isolated location that would be both safe and functional. At that point he had already chosen me as head of the command, so together we investigated a bit and found this place." He cast his gaze towards the shuttered window. "This building used to be a storage site for a metal factory. It was built during your father’s reign, so it’s not that old. But after a few years the production moved to a different location, and this place has stood empty ever since. We knew we had to renovate it, but with you still in the palace and on the verge of waking up from the Sages’ trance at any moment, we had to act quickly. So I took you, the staff, and all the vital equipment aboard a ship and sailed over here. When we reached shore, I had the crews install the basics - shutters on the windows, new floor, and everything else we’d need right away, while more refined construction would continue in the future."

Azula’s forehead crinkled as she scowled. "And was it really hard to tell me that the first time around?"
Dr. Low chuckled. "On the first day you had enough to think about, I'm sure. But more to the point, yes. I made my fair share of mistakes. For one thing, I should have immediately told you that you were on an island. But I thought that simply saying this was a hospital would be better, since it wouldn't make you feel like you were alone."

Azula grumbled. "Well that's exactly how it did make me feel. And why lie? I am alone."

"No, you're not."

"Yes I am. You're all on Zuko's side. He sent you here because he knew you'd be following his orders, which is to keep me out of everyone's way."

"Zuko is not your enemy. That hasn't changed since the first time we spoke. And even if it were a matter of who's on who's side, his orders aren't to keep you out of the way. They are to help you get better."

Dr. Low furrowed his brow. "You are fourteen years old," he said. "Forget everything else for a moment, and think about how young that is. You've traveled all over the world, where many girls your age are still thinking about the day they'll marry and leave their parents' houses. You've seen what it's like to govern, to play power games, and to bear a reputation. Those are things that people three times your age struggle with. Dealing with all of that in such early youth, then having it taken away from you just as the world as you know it changes forever, is hard to cope with. But life goes on. Yes, things might be different now, but that doesn't mean that you have to let those circumstances push you in a direction you don't want to go. If anything, you should look back at what happened and see it as evidence that the world really is only what you make of it. Your life is, too."

Azula narrowed her eyes and placed her chin in her palm. "You said you had five children?"

"Well, they're not so much children anymore. My youngest is nineteen, my oldest is twenty-eight."

Dr. Low smiled and gave a little shrug. "When you're a parent, you start seeing things differently."

But she didn't say anything, and after a few minutes Dr. Low finished his tea with her watching in
silence. Finally Isla came to clear the cups, and Dr. Low gave a smile. "Thank you, Isla."

Isla smiled as well and nodded. "My pleasure."

She was about to leave, but Dr. Low turned around to her. "Would you also stop by my office? There are some papers on my desk."

"Bring them, you mean?"

"Yes."

Isla left the room, and a minute later she came back with several scrolls in her hands. Dr. Low rose from the table. "Well, I'll leave you alone for now," he said to Azula. "I'll tell the nurses you won't have to do any therapy or exercises for a few days. I think we all owe each other a little break..." He turned to Isla and accepted the scrolls from her. He looked them over a final time, then placed them before Azula. "These might be of interest to you. They were in my office. Just newspapers from last week, when the latest shipment of supplies came from the mainland."

Azula looked at the scrolls, and after a moment, reached towards them. They were newsletters and leaflets from Capital City, along with some from western coastal towns. She unfurled each one in turn, looking at the headings.

"War Over, Avatar Returns..."

"Fire Lord's Crowning Met with Joy and Tears..."

"Capital City Holding a Festival, Eighth month, Fifth Day..."

She looked back up at Dr. Low, who was still standing there. "It's not much, but it'll help you feel connected," he said. "I can give you more in the future if you'd like."

Azula nodded in silence.

"I've also been talking with the construction crew about a new set of windows and better air circulation. Yesterday they sent me a hawk saying that they're still gathering the materials for shipment. So I suppose now's as good a time as ever to add a few more repairs to the list..." He smiled a little to himself, then with a parting nod, he turned to leave. Isla rolled Azula's wheelchair back towards the bed then moved the table and chair back to their place by the wall.

She took a few steps towards the door, then stopped and turned to Azula. "Do you want me to open the blinds?"

Azula crossed her arms, averting her gaze towards the floor. Nevertheless, Isla approached the window and pulled back the curtains, revealing the metal shutters. She fiddled with some devices high up in the frame, and moments later, the blinds opened up, letting in a flood of afternoon light. She left the room.

Once she was gone, Azula slowly looked up at the square of light on the floor. Her gaze drifted over to the window, where through the blinds, she saw the vast open sea, a carpet of calm, rippling waves. She grabbed the wheels of the chair and rolled herself up to the window, then put her elbows on the armrests and watched. Minutes later, she heard a faint caw, and in the distance, saw a red messenger hawk take off into the sky, a letter strapped to its back. The bird flapped its wings to adjust itself to the air currents, caught a favorable wind, and soared off towards the horizon.
The Lion Turtle in the Room

The hawk soared through what was left of the sunset, gliding past streaks of red and orange, then was silhouetted briefly as it shot past the sinking sun. Soon, the halo of light vanished from the horizon, and the sky began to dim, taking on gradually-darkening shades of purple and blue. Before long, night embraced the sea completely, and the bird's wings flapped silently over the calm, dark waves.

After a while, a long, dim shadow appeared on the horizon, growing steadily bigger as the hawk approached it. It revealed itself to be a shoreline, flat and rocky, leading up to a small, sparse forest. Locking its eyes on a destination, the bird swerved down, gliding right into the thick of the trees, and passed the remainder of the night on one of the branches. Then, hours later, the sun came up. Morning dawned on the Fire Nation in a glorious burst, casting a gleam on the waters, lighting miles of beaches, illuminating sprawling grasslands and volcanic mountains.

The hawk took off again, soaring past the remainder of the small island, passing through a sequence of several more that grouped into the distinct shape of an archipelago. Finally, with the sun directly overhead, the bird reached the main landmass. After some patches of forest and steadily-climbing hills, the land sloped up to form the largest peak yet - a massive, dormant volcano, whose wide rim was opened to revealed a dense city of pointed rooftops. The hawk swerved down again, plunging like a red comet into a conglomeration of streets and buildings, isolating a large, black building in the center as its target. The royal palace was notable even from aerial view, separated from the city by enormous walls and encircled by a stone promenade.

As the hawk continued to descend, the spots of color and movement within the palace walls shaped themselves into a delicate plot of buildings and walkways. The hawk was soon joined by several others, all of which had come from various directions, and now collected themselves into a single flock with the same destination in mind - a large walled garden filled with low-rising trees.

The hawks arrived in a tide of screeches and flapping wings. They dispersed themselves among the trees at whim, preening their feathers, and moments later a palace worker in uniform approached them with a basket. He held out seeds for each bird to eat, then plucked the letter or scroll from its back pouch and placed it into the basket. When he had tended to all the new arrivals, he went back to a small pavilion near the entrance, where a similarly-dressed woman was placing previous scrolls onto shelves.

"What've we got this time?" she asked.

The man approached the table beside her and began to look through his scrolls. "A few letters to the Fire Lord and some reports for the city office."

"All right," the woman replied. "We'll deliver the Fire Lord's in a few hours. He's at a war meeting right now."

The mailman looked at her with a frown. "A war meeting?"

After a brief pause, woman realized what she had said and slapped her forehead. "Oh, sorry! I meant a regular meeting." She shook her head. "It's hardly been a month. I still can't get over the fact that the war's actually over."

The man smiled. "I think a lot of people feel that way."
The woman smiled in return, but instead of it rising up all the way, her expression soon curved into a matter-of-fact look. "Well... I think the quicker we get used to it, the better."

The man nodded in agreement. "Yeah."

They finished sorting all of that morning's post together, then with their baskets in hand, went back to work.

... 

At that moment, inside the royal palace, a crowd of nobles was gathered before the closed doors of the throne room. Royal ministers and military officers congregated in tight groups, dressed in maroon uniforms with streamlined shoulder plates and tall collars. Many of them had swords strapped to their waists, still not wholly forgetful of the days of battles. Their conversations mingled in the air while they waited for the meeting to begin.

As the minutes went by, a few final arrivals entered the chamber and drifted off into circles of acquaintances. But one man hung back after stepping through the entrance, eyes sweeping the room, searching for something that he clearly couldn't find. After a brief hesitation, he began to wade through the sea of people, who casually stepped aside for him, revealing glimpses of servants roaming about with refreshments.

At last, the man's gaze locked on a long food table standing beside the wall. A man in a general's uniform was currently taking a drink from one of the glasses, gazing around the room impassively.

Recognizing him, the newcomer quickened his pace, and as he approached, the official turned to look at him.

"General Mak." The newcomer pressed his fists together and bowed.

The general inclined his head. "Good to see you, Aren."

Straightening, the newcomer looked around the room again, as if it was only from this spot that he could finally survey the entire scene properly. "Are the rumors true? Have we really cleared all our troops from the Earth Kingdom?"

The general sighed. "Nothing's true until it comes from the Fire Lord's mouth. That's the first thing you have to remember about the royal palace. But yes. All of the southwest is clear and Ba Sing Se has been left to its own devices. I'm expecting it'll take another few months to round up the people in the north and east, but by the end of this year, everyone will be home."

The man processed this and gave a slow nod. "So that's it. After a hundred years of war, it's peace. Just like that."

But to his surprise, General Mak shook his head. "This isn't peace. It's a cease-fire. Our army might be retreating, but we still have people stationed in the colonies, as well as naval fleets patrolling former battle zones. Even the Fire Lord knows it's not safe to withdraw everyone, at least not until the Earth Kingdom government gets itself on its feet. Just because we say the war's over doesn't mean the regular people will believe it." Here he paused, looking over to the enormous closed doors that led to the throne room. They were adorned by a pattern of solid gold flames that danced up their sides, reflecting the glow of the lanterns overhead. "For most people, he's still Fire Lord Ozai's son," Mak muttered. "And what he does in the next couple years will seal our country's place in the new world. Whether he admits it to himself or not."
The two men stood in silence for a moment, looking at the doors. Then the young man turned to the general, eyes slightly narrowed. "Do you know who he is?"

Mak did not ask for clarification. He simply shook his head. "No. I don't."

"But you can put me in touch with him?"

The general nodded.

"How?"

Mak took a breath. "You'll have to go to the meeting yourself. There's no other way; correspondence is too risky. The ones who were in his circle from the beginning received the information by mouth and passed the invitations on to others. I have a copy in my office that I can give to you. But that's as much as I can do. I'm charged with looking out for their secrecy, so I can't put names to faces."

All of a sudden, the doors to the throne room swung open and a pair of imperial guards stepped into the waiting chamber.

"Announcing the commencement of the meeting, Fire Lord Zuko presiding! Ministers, please take your seats."

A chorus of voices filled the room as the nobles began to move towards the door. General Mak cast a quick glance to his companion. "No more of this. Meet me outside the palace gates once the meeting is over."

Aren gave a bow and Mak left for the throne room.

The meeting lasted for three hours. After it was over, the quiet halls of the palace once again filled with a tide of uniforms and conversation. The nobles spilled out into the circular stone promenade that surrounded the palace grounds, some continuing towards the city while others lingered by the gates.

Moments later, Aren emerged as well and went to stand in an empty spot by the outside wall. He kept an eye on the officials leaving the palace, until finally General Mak appeared among them. The general approached him, clapped a hand over his shoulder as if in greeting, then discreetly slipped a scroll beneath his arm.

"Here's the invitation," Mak muttered. "It'll be your ticket to attend the meeting. Keep it safe and don't show it to anyone."

Aren gave a bow. "Yes, General."

He waited until Mak had gone back into the palace, then slowly turned away and set off on foot for the city.

Unbeknownst to him, a two-horse carriage that had been standing near the gates budged from its place at the same time. The ostrich-horses veered onto the roadway beside Aren, hanging back at a leisurely pace.

Aren followed the curve of the road until he was back in the upper city, a grid of spacious streets and pointed-roof buildings. He entered the busy traffic of carts and pedestrians, oblivious to the subtle clapping of hooves that was growing steadily louder behind him. He made several turns, passing through the busy shopping district, and had just approached a one-way turn into a residential area when he heard the sudden crack of a whip.
He spun around, where the large royal carriage was coming up behind him, its windows covered by thick fabric and the edges of its roof adorned with wrought-golden flames. A uniformed official poked his head out of the side door.

"You! Stop!"

It was the royal police.

Abandoning all composure, Aren turned away and broke into a run. He raced down to the end of the street, turning away from the residences and slipping in between two buildings. The driver cracked his whip again and the ostrich-horses sped forward.

Aren raced back to the shopping district, skirting around the street traffic and pedestrians, one hand clamping down the side of his coat where Mak's letter was hidden. The police carriage sped after him, disregarding all courtesy of transportation, easily fitting through the large gaps between buildings and trees. No matter how many turns Aren made, every time he looked over his shoulder he saw the ostrich-horses in hot pursuit, their feet pounding loudly on the stone pavement. Finally, he slowed to a stop, and as the ostrich-horses approached him, he turned and shot a burst of flame at them from his fist. The animals cried out and turned away, veering the cart to the side, and with several more punches of fire, Aren scorched the wheels and yoke.

He had just started to back away when the carriage's door burst open, and a team of six royal guards spilled out. They chased after him, punching flames into the air, and Aren broke into a run again.

He raced through the streets without any sort of plan now, cutting off carts and foot traffic, sporadically looking back and shooting jets of flames at the ground. But the red-clad guards kept good pace, cutting him off at various turns, forcing him to flee the roadways and cut across private lots. Finally, Aren reached a dead-end alleyway and started to turn, when suddenly, a lean figure in a long green dress jumped out from between two trees and cut him off. Two fists jabbed him in the ribs and shoulders, and the man slumped to the ground like a broken puppet. The scroll fell out of his coat, plopping to the ground. The attacker bent down to pick it up, then straightened to reveal short brown hair and a painted face.

Moments later, the police cart approached from the opposite direction, blackened in several places, but unharmed. The group of royal policemen followed after it. The cart came to a stop beside the girl, and moments later, an official emerged and descended the steps of the carriage. His hair was tied into a topknot and he wore a police captain's uniform, a variation of military dress with matching woven designs on the shoulder plates and collar.

The captain accepted the scroll from the girl and took a placid look at the noble, who lay exhausted on the road. The guards rushed over to lift him up, but Aren was only able to rise to his knees and hang limply from their grip.

The captain cracked a smile. "Boy. I don't think I've seen someone run with like that in a while. Made for quite a bit of fun, I gotta say. But word of advice, son - if you're being tailed by the cops, firebending's a no-no. That gives us the right to use fire in return. But if you hold it back, see, then you've got the benefit of the doubt, and we can only scorch the stuff around you." He gave a sigh and shook his head. "Always gotta teach the kids..."

Aren made no response. The captain watched him silently for another moment, then turned back to the girl, lifting his chin with a smile. "So. Chi blocking, eh?"

The girl smiled back. "He'll be good for half an hour. After that, though, he might start shooting fireballs at you, so I'd be careful."
"Oh, don't worry. This shouldn't take long." The captain turned back to the nobleman, who was hanging powerlessly in the guards' clutches, watching them through narrowed eyes. The captain unrolled the scroll and began to read it.

To my brothers and sisters,

We take pride in the legacy of our fathers. We uphold the noble heritage of the Fire Nation and await the day when its destiny will be realized. My wish is that we will see each other soon, so let us gather on the fringes of our city on the ninth moon, fifth day, twenty-third hour.

May the sun never set on our kingdom,

Tao Yu

"So, this is the letter that's taking the city by storm." The captain tilted his head. "I honestly thought it would be more imaginative. People usually give their little mafias names, like the Dissenters Division or Breaker Brigade. Or are you guys the type who think on the fly?"

The nobleman cast away his gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about. There have been patriotic conventions going on all over the country. You can't say having one more is unusual, can you?"

"I suppose not," the captain said. "What I do find unusual though is that a patriotic convention should have to take place at night, in the outskirts of town, and be hidden from the Royal Police so meticulously that its members lock their invitations in boxes."

The nobleman scowled.

The captain rolled up the scroll. "I'm going to give you five seconds to tell me everyone else who's involved in your little reading club, or I'll send you to the Boiling Rock. They'll get the information out of you."

He waited, but the nobleman didn't respond.

"Two seconds." The captain tapped the edge of the scroll against his palm. "Four seconds."

The nobleman did not speak.

The captain waved to the policemen. "Boiling Rock it is. Take him away."

The policemen hoisted the nobleman to his feet, who immediately gave a wince. "I don't know!" he blurted. "I don't know who they are! No one does!"

The captain narrowed his eyes. "You're telling me you got a letter from someone you don't even know?"

"Yes!"

"And you're doing what he's telling you to do? That has to mean you know what he wants, then. What is it?"

The nobleman started to answer, but bit it back. He shook his head. "I don't know! I was just… I was just curious!"

The captain shook his head. "Take him."
"No!" The nobleman fought against the guards' grip. They dragged him across the sidewalk, and his yelps gradually faded behind the closing carriage door.

Left alone with the captain, the girl crossed her arms. "You know, there's something I don't understand. During the coronation, everyone was happy. Everyone cheered when they heard Zuko say that the war was over. So what's with all these vandals running around?"

The captain smiled. "The people you saw at the coronation stand for roughly a third of our population. Those are the educated people, the traveled ones, the ones who disagreed with the war of their own accord. Or they're the average ones, the people who lived their entire lives with the conflict in the background. But think about everyone else. The people who got laid off from their factories because we don't need any more airships. The men from poor families hoping to earn money by going to war, who just found out that we're demilitarizing. People whose businesses are collapsing and know that the government will start taxing them to pay the Earth Kingdom compensation. Those are the people causing trouble. Peace is uprooting as many lives as it's saving, so we'll be running into a lot more of this in the next few months. But it's just a phase. In a year or so, everyone will learn to start living normally again, and it'll start to cool down."

"I hope so." The girl crossed her arms. After a moment, she looked back towards the carriage. "Do you really send everyone you catch to the Boiling Rock?"

The captain shrugged. "The Rock makes people talk. Even if you're not being kept in it. Just the thought of being put in the Cooler is enough to get your average street criminal to confess."

A smile crossed the girl's face. "Can't argue with that. I spent over a month there myself."

"Really?"

"Yep. They separated me from the other Kyoshi Warriors because I was their leader." She pursed her lips. "That wasn't the best time of my life. Sitting in a tiny cell all day really changes your outlook on the world."

The captain smiled. "Huh. I bet..." His gaze drifted down to the scroll again, and he opened it, taking a moment to read it over. Gradually, his face adopted a pensive look. "You know, I've seen a lot of things these past few weeks. Gang logos carved into posts, flyers on doors... But this letter is downright strange. Look at the wood." He held the scroll out for the girl to inspect. The wood of the tube was polished smooth, and when he placed it into her hands, she weighed it carefully.

"It's heavy," she remarked.

"And the calligraphy is perfect," the captain said. "It looks like it could've come from the palace itself."

The girl began to read the scroll. "'Fringes of our city?' That's a bit vague. It's almost like this Tao Yu person expected his readers to know what he was talking about."

"Which means that he wasn't intending to spread it to just anyone - he wanted to give it to people who already knew about the meeting beforehand."

The girl lowered the scroll. "So this isn't a membership invitation. It's a call to action."

She raised her head, and the two stared at each other in silence. A moment later, the senior officer who had been tending to the carriage approached them. "Captain Lang. We've locked him in, sir. But he's restless. He's starting to say things about underground groups and government opposition."
Captain Lang gave a nod. "Take him to the city jail for now. Tell him if he cooperates with us, we'll keep him there instead of the Rock."

"Yes, sir." The officer went back to the carriage, and the captain and the girl followed. Once everyone had boarded, the driver cracked a whip and the carriage sped off down the street.

Beyond the rim of the Capital City Crater, down the steep slope of rocks and grass, the land shed its coat of vegetation and sprawled out into a barren, rocky desert. Nor far from the main mountain, a smaller, hollow crater rose up over the terrain, lazily curving up to end at a jagged rim. A lone traveler was currently making his way towards it, crossing the stretch of no-man's-land that separated it from the city. He had long black hair tied into a ponytail and wore a dark red uniform with arm cuffs and shin guards. A helmet was tucked beneath his arm. Oftentimes he squinted up at the sky, then blinked and looked around at the empty landscape around him.

The land that surrounded the crater was a circle of bald rock. To the man's left, some of the grass was still growing, and in the distance, he could see several smaller peaks hiding clusters of buildings. Then, beyond that, the land took a gradual plunge and exposed the distant shoreline, where water sparkled in the daylight. As he walked, his gaze shifted between the unique scene to the helmet in his hands. It was made of metal and had little bronze flaps around the forehead and sides. He tilted them back and forth, casting their shine around.

The man continued towards the crater at a leisurely pace, until he reached the beginning of the upward slope, where he saw the tips of white towers peaking over the natural rock. Each tower had a guard station built on top of it, attended by people in dress similar to his. At this point, the man glanced down at his wristwatch, which resembled a miniature sundial, and glanced up at the sky a few times to correct his position for a measurement. Once he saw the time, however, he immediately gasped and quickened his pace.

He ascended the slope of the crater, and upon reaching the rim, he walked up to one of the watch stations and approached the guard.

"Excuse me, I'm here to see the warden. I'm starting work today." The man took out a small paper from his pocket and handed it to the guard.

The guard gave the paper a quick once-over and yawned. "So. Fresh meat."

"That's usually what we say about prisoners," the newcomer remarked.

The guard smiled. "Aren't we all, though?"

He beckoned and led the newcomer into the watchtower, where they descended a windowless spiral staircase to the bottom of the crater. Stepping out into the open air again, the newcomer looked up and saw that the walls of the crater had risen up around them, blocking sight of everything save for a round splotch of sky, like the view from inside the mouth of a beast. Various accommodations had been built into the stone, including a walkway and a courtyard. But the thing that attracted the eye was a white stone tower built right into the face of the crater, its round belly dotted with windows.

The guard gave him the paper back, and the newcomer set off for the tower at the same agitated pace. As he approached the tower, he unfolded the paper and scanned the message for the tenth time that day: Warden Poon. Room 20. Eight o'clock.
He approached the doors to the tower, where another helmeted guard awaited him. After reading the paper, he motioned the newcomer inside and led him into the tower's entrance room. The room was bare and completely devoid of human tampering, save for a halfheartedly-flattened floor and small windows. A narrow doorway stood at the opposite wall, from which a third guard appeared moments later. Unlike the previous two, he had his helmet in his hands, revealing a plain, short hairstyle.

He approached the newcomer, giving a smile. "Hey. You're the new guy, right?"

The newcomer nodded. "Yeah. My name's Kinchil. It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm Mo." The guard took Kinchil's hand and shook it. "The Warden's already expecting you, so we'll head on over."

Kinchil nodded again. "All right. I'll follow you."

Mo beckoned and turned to lead the way. They entered a bare hallway, which was bathed in an orange hue by electric ceiling lamps. They made a few twists and turns, until finally Mo slowed to a stop beside a door. It was made of metal and had an inscription carved into the face: WARDEN.

Mo knocked. Moments later came a gruff reply. "Come in!"

The guard opened the door to reveal a small, windowless office room. It had a several metal bookshelves stocked with boxes and a writing desk where a man was sitting. He had a large, muscular build and gray hair, though it seemed like anyone who called him Grandpa would have their teeth knocked out. His hands were currently employed holding a scroll, however, which he looked up from as the guards entered.

Mo closed the door behind them and stepped forward. "Warden Poon, I have the new guard here."

He motioned for Kinchil to approach the desk, which he did, stopping before the warden and bowing.

Poon set the scroll aside and surveyed him. "So, Kinchil, is it?"

"Yes sir."

"That's an unusual name. Where are you from?"

"My family lives up north, close to Fire Fountain City. That's where-"

"Yes, that's where you worked before. No need to fill me in, Warden Lao told me everything already." Poon rolled up the scroll and leaned back in his chair. "He gave a good review of your performance, but he also said you that have a tendency to... overthink things."

Kinchil maintained eye contact with the warden, but shifted his weight ever so slightly.

"Now, I don't believe in starting off easy or giving people chances," said Poon. "There's a job that needs to be done in this place, and if you can't do what that job demands, I send you back. As I'm sure you've heard, Fire Lord Zuko is doing a full-blown cleaning of the government. His goal is to weed out anyone who might still be loyal to the old ways. This puts a strain on us, because over the next few months, prisoners will be coming and going like ship passengers. People who are free now could be locked up, and people you're feeding today could be out on the streets with you tomorrow. It'll be a mess, and when there's a mess in the system, the prisoners get rowdy." Poon reached for a thick folder that lay to the side and opened it. "That's why I need more people patrolling the building. I know you're a good firebender, so eventually I might station you outside, but for now I need you
with the prisoners. You'll be feeding them and watching over them whenever they're out of their cells, for exercise and whatnot. They're a lonely bunch, so there'll always be someone who'll try to pick a fight for the heck of it or try to convince you that they're innocent because they've got no one else to talk to. But none of that stuff should concern you. Your job is to make sure the place is running smoothly. Do you understand?"

Kinchil gave a ready nod. "Yes sir."

"Good. If you have any other questions, you can ask Mo. He'll be your mentor for the first week, and once the lunch break is over, he'll show you around. For now, read this." Poon handed him another scroll, which Kinchil unfolded to reveal a map of the prison. "This is the layout of all nine floors, with a diagram of the cells, stairways, and major exit points. Put it into your locker and don't ever take it outside our walls. You can look at it as much as you want when you're in here, just use your brain and don't have it sticking out of your pocket when you're with the prisoners. We've had to move them around a few times in the past because of that."

"I won't, sir."

"Other than that, Mo will explain everything. In a minute you'll leave and start giving the crowd lunch. I have Ming and Ito covering the firebenders, so you'll be doing the nonbenders. They won't do anything to you, as long as you don't stick your fingers in the cages." Poon snickered. Seeing Kinchil's eyes widen, he glanced over to Mo. "Ah, he understands." Smiling, Poon looked back at the new guard. "You know who our VIP is, then?"

Kinchil's shoulders stiffened. "Phoe—Fi… Ozai."

Warden Poon gave a full-blown laugh, clutching his belly. "We call him the Phoenix King around here. I might as well tell you about him; it'll spare you some awkward questions in the lounge. He's our…" Poon squinted up at the ceiling philosophically, "… our lion turtle in the room. You know what a lion turtle is, don't you?"

"The biggest animal in the world," Kinchil replied. "But they're not real. Or… at least, they were, but they died out centuries ago."

"That's right," said Poon. "And imagine you walked into a big room with lots of people, where there's a lion turtle standing right in the middle. Not moving, not talking, just standing there and looking down at everyone. Would you point it out to somebody?"

Kinchil gave a nod. "Of course, sir."

Poon lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure? Even if no one's looking at it? Even if no one mentions it? Lion turtles are extinct, remember. They're not supposed to be standing in rooms, and if you do so much as lift your finger at it, people will say you're crazy. Even if they see it as clearly as you do."

Kinchil thought this over and frowned. "I'm not sure I follow that logic, sir."

"Imagine you live in a country that's been at war for an entire century," said Poon. "The war was started by one ruler, then continued by his son, and by the son of that son. This third ruler gets crowned during a pretty low point - the nation's just lost an important battle and got kicked out with its tail tucked between its legs. This defeat sends the world a message of weakness and could potentially stir up a counterattack. But the new ruler acts quickly to prevent this. He spends five years on the throne and shows that he's a good commander, and in spite of some bad moments he manages to get back the position of advantage. Eventually he achieves a victory that's so decisive that it practically wins him the war. The only thing left for him to do is take that final step to make his
victory certain. So he comes up with a plan to crush all resistance to his armies in a single swipe.

"But right in the middle of it, he's suddenly struck down by a famous and powerful individual, and the whole plan stops in its tracks. The challenger doesn't kill the ruler, but he lets the circumstances remain mysterious enough for most of the world to think that he died. He and the ruler's successor both understand that the world needs closure. They know that the only way people will accept the new peace is for a criminal to be publicly disposed of. On his part, the new ruler doesn't confirm or deny what happened. The official word is that the past ruler's power is broken for good, which most people take anyway to mean that he's dead. But actually that old ruler is sitting in a prison cell, holding a blanket and being fed three times a day. The only thing that's gone is his firebending."

Warden Poon smiled. "The prison staff know, obviously. So do the people high up in the new government. Some of them want to move on from the old ruler, so they act like he doesn't exist. Others still think he should be the one on the throne, but since they don't want to get arrested, they don't mention him either. No one talks about him, but everyone's thinking about him. He's hanging over everyone's heads, like a giant lion turtle in the room. The subject of a silent conversation."

Kinchil looked at the warden in amazement and understanding. "Ah…"

"Your job here is to keep that silence," Poon concluded. "Do your job and let people imagine the rest for themselves. If anyone in town asks you what happened to Ozai, say you're bound to secrecy. If some lowlife here begs to know if we have the Phoenix King, tell them to mind their own business. If they want to, they'll find out on their own. Prisoners love to gossip."

Kinchil nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And as for Ozai himself?" Poon shrugged. "He's just a man who lost. He was a good Fire Lord, I won't deny it. Patriotic, decisive. He was the leader our country needed. But if they put him back on that throne tomorrow, he'd banish the entire continent's population and go back to wallowing." He crossed his arms. "Why don't you see for yourself? I can tell you're curious. He's in Cell 139, on the ninth floor. Mo can take you up, and you can get some practice with the other high-security prisoners too, while you're at it. Meet the lion turtle and you'll be an official part of informed society."

Poon cracked a smile at his own joke and went back to reading his scroll.

Mo led Kinchil out of the office, and from there, Kinchil followed him down the hall to the kitchens. Past the sounds of clanging trays and hissing water, Mo stopped before a door and pushed it open, revealing a room full of metal carts. The carts all had multiple shelves stocked with the same assortment of food: a bowl of meat, bread, and water. Mo took the nearest cart by the handle and steered it out of the room, leading Kinchil further down the hallway till they reached an accordion door.

"We only have three elevators in the whole prison," Mo explained. "It's because the tower's really old, so they couldn't find a way to fit any more. Technically we're only supposed to use them for floors six and up, but sometimes the other guards steal them to make food rounds easier. I hope this one's free…" He pulled the handle to the side, and the door folded back to reveal a wrought-iron screen. Through the diamond-shaped holes, Kinchil saw a shallow, box-like space. Mo smiled and pulled it open.

The elevator had just enough room to fit the two of them with the food cart in between. Once Mo had closed both doors, he turned to a small speaker on the wall and pressed the button beneath it.

"Ninth floor, please!" he said.

Someone's voice replied moments later: "On it."
Kinchil heard the sound of turning gears, and the elevator began to ascend. They climbed for a few seconds until the elevator screeched to a stop, and Mo slid open the doors to reveal a long, dim hallway. The left wall was paved with smooth, straight blocks, while the wall to the right was rough and unrefined, like a cave's. The murky lighting came from bowls of fire mounted on the jagged surface. Mo pushed the cart forward, and Kinchil followed him all the way to the end, where they made a turn and entered another section. Here, wooden doors were spaced along the left, with no locks or numbers.

"This is where we keep the dangerous ones," Mo whispered. "It doesn't look like much, but the cells are spaced wider and the walls are backed with steel in case someone tries to pick their way out." He stopped the cart at a nondescript door and turned to Kinchil with a smile. "Are you ready?" He reached for the door and pushed it open.

The firelight spilled into a dark, silent room, touching the bars of a steel cage that stood against the back wall. The emotion slid from Mo's face like dirt under rain as he took a tray from the cart.

"Breakfast," he said.

He handed Kinchil the tray, and Kinchil went inside, kneeling down to the bars of the cell. He couldn't see anything beyond them, and for a moment, succeeded in convincing himself that there was no one inside. He put down the tray.

Right then, a shape stirred in the shadows. There was a rustle as something crawled up to the bars, and before Kinchil could react, a pair of amber eyes lit up in the torchlight just inches away from his face. Kinchil felt an almost tangible zap, as if someone had sent a current of lightning down his spine, and fell back onto his hands. Those weren't the eyes of defeat. They were alive and furious, like two pools of magma seconds away from eruption.

Kinchil slid himself away from the bars, then rose to his feet and left the room, hoping that the shadows masked his expression of shock. He didn't look back to see how Ozai had reacted. He immediately closed the door behind him and went back to the cart.

Mo pushed it onward, and once they were far enough from Ozai's cell, he turned to Kinchil. "So, what do you think?"

Kinchil let out a breath. "Is his firebending really gone?"

"Yep. The Fire Sages confirmed it. Whatever Avatar Aang did to him, his bending is gone and never coming back."

Kinchil lowered his head. "It doesn't seem like it."

Mo nodded. "I know what you mean. But you'll get used to it. Over time you'll start seeing him as just another prisoner." They were silent for a moment, as the metal wheels rolled noisily over the stones. "And hey, if you think about it, he's even less of a problem than some of the other people here. He can't bend, for one thing, and that fight with the Avatar really did a number on his strength. The worst he can really do is glare at you. But some of the firebenders in here, those can get nasty. We've got the leader of a raider fleet in here, and an Imperial Firebender."

"What did they get the Imperial Firebender for?"

"I don't know. A lot of them were on Ozai's airships, though, so they were probably the first ones to get interrogated. I guess he still supports Ozai's plan to take over the world."

Kinchil's eyes flashed with alarm. "And you don't think that putting the old Fire Lord on the same
Mo smiled. "Didn't you hear the warden? Ozai's a mystery. Even the prisoners who know he's here don't know exactly where he is. And between you and me, some of these guys are too insane to care. Like this one." He stopped the cart beside another door. "I'll take him. You watch." He took a tray into his hands and pushed open the door. "Breakfast!"

This prisoner was sitting at the front of the cell, so when the light spilled in, Kinchil had no trouble spotting him. His beard and moustache covered so much of his face that he looked like he could have been any age - thirty, or eighty. His blanket was tied around his neck like a cape, and he wore a strange, flat cap that hung askew on his head.

Mo slid the tray up to the bars, and without a moment's delay, the prisoner reached to take a few pieces of meat from the bowl. He bit off what little flesh there was and collected the bones in the center of his palm. Seconds later, there was a soft hiss as a bright yellow flame erupted from his hand. The man squinted and peered into it.

"Dragon-bird spirit, this is Commander Deng! Tell me if my message got through to that rat, General Po!"

Mo's hand closed around the cup of water on the tray. But the man kept staring into the fire in anticipation, and moments later, he smirked.

"Ah, General Po! Dear me, why the unfriendly greeting? If you had taken that advice from me the first time, then you would have won the Battle of the Three Hills!… What was that? Oh, the Fire Lord's orders? The same Fire Lord who told your army to abandon camp at River End and head south, right into the storm at Gar Sai? I warned about that storm a month beforehand! But Fire Lord Azulon insisted that his readings were correct, and now you, my friend, are talking to me from the other side of the world, while the Fire Nation is marred by yet another failure thanks to the Great Sage's… what? I've lost you!" The flame flickered and dimmed. "Hello?" The man leaned closer, till his nose was nearly touching the edge of the dying fire. But the flames continued to grow smaller and redder, and as a last resort he reached in with his other hand and began to stir the bones, completely oblivious to the heat. But despite his efforts, the fire went out, exposing a lump of ash in his palm. The man spat.

"Blast it! These bones burn like leaves." He scattered the ash around him and pushed the tray aside.

"If you don't eat now, you won't get anything else till evening," said Mo.

The man glanced over to him and scowled. "Good! And don't bother coming back until you've got some quality bones, ones that can keep a decent connection!" He turned away from the bars and slouched over his lap.

Mo got up to leave, and once he had closed the door behind him, he looked at Kinchil with a sigh. "That's Commander Deng. He's been here even longer than the warden has. He got put here by Azulon ten years ago, but no one knows why. Poon says he's got his papers somewhere, but he doesn't even think of sending his case to the Fire Lord."

"Why not?" Kinchil asked.

"The guy is certified crazy. He sees spirits and talks to people who've been gone for years as if they're right in the room with him. And he talks about premonitions like the weather. I personally don't care for that kind of stuff, but I know Azulon sure did. I bet Deng just said some things that caused dissent in the army, so Azulon sent him straight to high-security. Then Azulon died, and I
guess everyone forgot about him. Zuko might be sympathetic and let Deng go, but really, this is the only place he can go. The only way the warden would let him out is if he goes into exile somewhere, with a bunch of doctors to help bring him back to reality. But I don't think the Fire Nation has places like that.”

Mo pushed the cart onward and Kinchil followed. They went around the other cells in the high-security ward, then took the elevator down to the lower floors. Once lunch was over, Mo took Kinchil to the assembly room to prepare for lockdown hours.

In Kinchil's hometown, the prison had been a simple building with fences and shutters. But as his old warden Lao had promised, Capital City was different. In matters of security it was second probably only to the Boiling Rock. It had no need for walls, since the crater rose up over fifty feet around it. The prison tower was built right into the face of the rock, where one of the peaks curved over it and shielded it from the rain. During the course of a day, the shadow of the overhang would shift across the face of the tower and plunge some of the cells into darkness. After a couple hours of studying the prison map in the break room and drawing optical diagrams, Kinchil managed to calculate where the sun would shine at different times of day. He found that the cells on the lower floors got the most light, since the tower jutted out slightly at the base, while the upper cells, most notably the high-security ones, got little.

A few hours before sunset, his first day of duty ended, and Kinchil left the tower building to rest up before his early shift the next morning. He paced around the crater's perimeter, looking up at the sentry guards who stood on the battlements. He saw them casually greeting other guards that passed by, and down below, saw others leading small groups of prisoners away from the courtyard in single-file. Kinchil noted with a slight uneasiness that the prisoners were wearing simple ankle chains and handcuffs. They had never taken prisoners outside in the Fire Fountain prison. For Warden Lao, prisoners and outside air didn't mix. Granted, the Fire Fountain prison was located in the middle of a city street, but even so, Kinchil had always thought it obvious that prisoners shouldn't be trusted to keep the peace when they were being escorted somewhere. One moment they could be complacent, and the next they could hit you with a fistful of fire and run off for freedom.

The other guards had assured Kinchil that everything was fine, that even the Boiling Rock had a courtyard, and that no prisoner would ever be foolish enough to try anything when they were outside. The premises was completely surrounded by walls and patrolled from the outside day and night. Getting out through the tower was impossible with guards on every floor, and if a prisoner did manage to dig through the window side, they would plunge to their deaths into the rocks.

Yet Kinchil still couldn't shake the feeling of unease he got when he thought about the prisoner in Cell 139. Every firebender had a bit of the sun in them, and every day, from precisely eight to eleven o'clock, that prisoner would emerge from his darkness into the light, and crave the fire he'd once been able to control.

...
He stepped around to a small file cabinet nearby and began to examine the contents, which consisted of scrolls, letters, and reports. The junior captain gathered up the folders from the desk moments later, and together he and Lang began to arrange them on the shelves. Lang turned to look at the girl, who had come to stand in front of the desk.

"We'll hit a few more places in the lower city tomorrow, Suki. Then you'll be free to rejoin your teammates in the palace."

The girl gave a nod. "Don't worry. My girls are doing fine without me. And really, the Kyoshi Warriors are just a precaution. The Fire Lord never meant for us to take the place of his regular guards anyway."

Captain Lang smiled. "That may be true, but for some reason the regular guards never end up being enough when there's a real threat."

Suki crossed her arms. "Well, I can't argue with that… Though I gotta admit, the Imperial Firebenders try. And they make it somewhat hard to get past them when they do."

A puzzled expression crossed Lang's face. "Wait… you were one of the airship raiders, weren't you? It was either you or another one of your girls. I remember the Fire Lord telling me about it."

Suki smiled. "Yeah, that was me. And two of my friends, Sokka and Toph."

Lang raised his eyebrows. "So three kids took out twelve airships, all fully-armed and staffed?" He gave a laugh. "I don't think I'll ever understand it."

Suki gave a playful tilt of the head. "Did I ever mention that my friend was a metalbender?"

"A what, now?"

"A metalbender," Suki said. "That's what she calls it, anyway. It's a technique she invented. I don't know how it works exactly, but she says she can feel impurities in the metal that were left behind when it was made. And she bended those little bits of earth to deform the airships."

Lang lifted his eyebrows. "Impressive." He filed away the last few folders. "Funny, how things work out… In the police, there's this general consensus that kids have no place in official business. But the Avatar turned out to be a young boy. Our new Fire Lord is a teenager. You Kyoshi girls are hardly any older than he is. And a few days ago, one of his friends showed me up in some strange strategy game that I can't even remember the rules of…"

Suki smiled. "Yep. That's Sokka. He's our little mastermind."

"So how are you kids doing now?"

"We're all pretty good. Sokka and Katara are staying here for a while, while their dad's fleet is still here. Toph left for the Earth Kingdom. She's thinking about starting an earthbending school, but she says she has to fix some family issues first. I'm not sure what she meant by that, but it's gotta be something important."

Captain Lang gave a nod. He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and took out the scroll tube he had taken from Aren. He unrolled it to read the message a final time, then opened one of his desk drawers and placed it into a pile of several others.

After a moment, Suki spoke up. "So… how many of those letters have you guys found, exactly?"
"Three. This one's the fourth."

"Huh. Well, that doesn't seem to be that many..."

Lang breathed a sigh. "It's not about the number, it's about the pattern. The first one got spotted by one of the palace guards, lying crumpled up in the fireplace of a minister we convicted earlier. During the interrogations, he said flat-out that he'd never accept Prince Zuko as Fire Lord or swear loyalty to him. Doing that is technically fine, from the official side of things, but as a consequence you lose your job, possibly your titles, and will generally be looked down upon by the other nobles if you ever have the guts to show your face around them again. But it won't get you in jail, per se. What *does* get you in jail is evidence that you've taken action to damage to the government. And the minister threatened to take action, so there was really nothing else to do with him but to jail him. We put him in the Rock." Lang paused. "Then we went through his possessions and found the letter. The next two came from the lower city - one was lying in the fireplace of a guest house, and the other was lying right in the middle of a street, face-up. All of them were just within a few days of each other."

Suki frowned. "What does the Fire Lord think about this?"

Lang gave a one-shoulder shrug. "He said to keep an eye out, so I am. We'll probably start showing these to people at the interrogations, too, to see if they know anything about it."

Suki nodded. She turned around to look at the rest of the room, then back at the tapestry above Lang's desk. "So, how long have you been the police captain?"

"Eight years." Lang smiled. "Though there wasn't much to do for the first seven. The old captain called it the laziest public office, since palace security is taken care of by the royal guards, and nothing ever happens in the upper city. There were some scandals in the lower city from time to time, but those were rare too."

Suki's gaze swept across the bookshelves in the distance, where some officers were filing away case files. The junior captain had taken a seat in an chair nearby and was reading a scroll. She turned to Captain Lang, frowning in curiosity. "So does... the police get interrogated too?"

Lang laughed. "What do you think? Of course we do! We were one of the first sectors the Fire Lord looked into, actually, after the military. He wanted to make sure he could have Capital City secure for him. So he went right on in here with his guards and asked to speak with me. First Fire Lord who ever showed up in my office. And the first one who actually offered me *tea* in my own building... Well, I told him about myself, he told me about himself, and I said right on out that I'd be ready to serve him. A Fire Lord like that is going to get us places. *Good* places."

Suki smiled. "We think so, too."

A brief silence settled over them, but moments later it was broken as a police officer burst into the room from the distant entrance. Suki, Lang, and the junior captain all turned, watching as the officer approached them with two guards at his side and bowed to Captain Lang.

"Sir. A letter's just come in from Captain Sung in South Chung-Ling," the officer said. "It's marked urgent."

"What does it say?"

The officer unrolled a thick scroll and began to read it. "."Captain Lang. The government interrogations are continuing in our city in accordance with the Fire Lord's instructions and in close..."
cooperation with palace officials. But my team has discovered a development that I fear will bring consequences if it is not dealt with soon. I am afraid we do not have the resources to deal with this ourselves, as I suspect that the problem is not confined to our city alone.

'This past Friday, some of my police were patrolling the downtown and discovered a disturbance on one of the streets. Some civilians had gotten into a fight with a group of guards at the entrance to a pub. My police came to stop the fight, and upon identifying the guards, they found that they were civilians as well, not the pub's employees. They entered the building and found it to be deserted, save for a side room that appeared to be locked from the inside. Behind the door, they heard a conversation, which appeared to be held in a meeting of around ten people.

'From my police's reports, the people were heard to mention Fire Lord Ozai, the Princess Azula, and the names of some other palace officials, in an atmosphere of clear disapproval of the new Fire Lord's rule. Detailed quotes couldn't be made, but all of my police distinctly remember hearing the following statement: "Since the throne can only be passed down in the event of the previous ruler's death or abdication, the fact that Ozai is alive means that the throne is still in his possession. Therefore, the current Fire Lord's rule is illegitimate."

'The speaker at the meeting obtained his listeners' unanimous approval, and concluded by assuring them that plans were underway to 'do what is necessary'.

'These and several other enclosed reports have caused me to believe that there is an underground pro-Ozai movement in South Chung-Ling. I have attached all the documents my team has gathered and I hope that you will be able to work with us to stop this. As of now, we do not know what this group's goal is, but we have no doubt that they are seeking to take action against the government."

The officer finished reading and looked up from the scroll. Captain Lang rubbed his chin. "What else did he include?"

The officer looked down. "Aside from some more testimonies, his team also noticed that certain accused officials emptied their file cabinets before the search teams could get to them, and that certain lower-ranking workers disappeared before they could be interrogated. Sung has evidence that many of them communicated with each other. He also included copies of a letter that he was able to retrieve from some of the officials' private stores. All of the letters described a meeting that would take place on a certain date and time in their city, and it was signed by a person named Tao Yu." He showed Captain Lang the letter, which turned out to be a near copy of the one Aren had been carrying, save for a slight difference in the specification of date and time.

Captain Lang began to pace around the room, clasping his hands behind his back. "Then whoever these people are, they're organized and unified. And given that they have copies of our letter, some of their people must be in our city as well." He turned to the junior captain. "Get the carriage ready. We're going to interrogate that noble."

The junior captain scurried off the way they had come, and moments later, he, Lang, Suki, and some other officers boarded the carriage and set out through the rapidly-darkening evening to the downtown jail. After some questioning, Aren finally confessed that he had been given the letter earlier that day by General Mak. Wasting no time, Lang returned to the upper city, and in a matter of minutes, assembled a squad of policemen and stormed into the villa where the general lived. But inside, they found all the rooms emptied, and the general gone.
After one week into his new job, Kinchil understood why Warden Poon had needed more help. The prison was like an overcrowded ship in the middle of its morning rush. All of its one-hundred-forty cells were occupied, forcing the kitchens and sanitary crews to work practically nonstop, and the mail room was cluttered with statements of arrest and release, which the mail guards would relate to everyone else on duty and ignite stirs of gossip.

The prisoners were a mix of nobility and nobodies, master fighters and people who could hardly bend down to touch their toes. Poon had divided the firebenders into three classes and immediately assigned Kinchil to the highest. Those were the ones who could distort their metal handcuffs with heat and retaliate with flame whips when other inmates got on their nerves. And unfortunately, those cases were many. After the latest rounds of trials, four more military commanders had been imprisoned, all of whom immediately began to release a long-harbored spite and distaste for one another. On Kinchil's third day, two of them started a fight in the courtyard, charing the brick walls and setting several trees on fire. Kinchil had rushed to the scene just as the fight climaxed, with both men firing enormous torrents of flame directly at each other. He hastened to curve the colliding jets upward, making them bend away from each other like snakes and dissipate into the air. Out of dry humor, some of the other prisoners had started clapping.

From conversations with the other guards, Kinchil discovered that he was the newest of many recruits, more than Capital City Prison had had in a long time. Some had come from the jail in the lower city, while others had been transferred from cities nearby. The rest of the guards had been there much longer. Mo, his mentor, had started six years before, and Shen, one of Mo's friends, had come the year after. Capital City had many female guards as well, the most proficient of whom was Ming. She had showed Kinchil a firebending trick when they were on patrol together and helped him wrestle quarreling prisoners to the ground.

Fortunately, Warden Poon never let more than a few prisoners out into the yard at once. And he only let them out occasionally, when he deemed they had spent a long enough time in solitary confinement to dull their violent impulses. But other than that, there were no blocks to chip, no machines to build. Prisoners spent the entire day alone in their cages, not seeing anybody else save for the guards who gave them food. And even that was designed to be as minimally stimulating as possible - the guard came, dropped off the tray, then left.

Though since there was little to no supervision of the situation, some of the guards took it as an opportunity to play games. Shen liked to place the tray just out of arm's reach to see how the prisoner would improvise to get it. Some of them were left reaching and straining themselves for minutes on end, until they finally shot curses (and sometimes fireballs) at him, while others used their shirts or blankets as a hook to pull the tray over, long past the point where that kind of degradation bothered them. Ming always responded to Shen's boasting with glares, stating that his behavior was only asking for the prisoners to hate him. In her opinion, it was better to treat them fairly, if not earning their respect then at least not stirring up their anger.

As for Kinchil himself, he preferred not to fix what wasn't broken and stuck to the same procedure he had used for his entire career, which was to simply fulfill his obligations as close to the letter as possible. He spoke to the Capital City prisoners plainly and never lingered with them for too long a time. Not that the surrounding environment did much to stimulate conversation - beyond the wide spaces and efficient technology of the lower floors, the rest of the prison tower was a network of long, narrow stone passageways. When it rained, water from outside would seep in through cracks in the stone and leave puddles on the floor for days. It was cold and dark, and no matter how upbeat
Kinchil would feel going in, coming back from the upper floors always left him shrouded in a melancholy mood. He longed for the day when he would become like Ito, one of the senior guards, who had long become used to doing food rounds and saw them as a simple routine that could easily be pushed away from one's mind once it was over.

But there was one exception to everybody's rule, and that was the former Fire Lord Ozai. That was the person who made Shen suspicious and scrutinizing, Ming cautious and wary, and Ito strangely contemplative and philosophical.

He had been in the prison for over a month, though the time had passed by without incident. He had had no visitors, save for the very beginning when Fire Lord Zuko had come, presumably to make a final statement. Since then, Ozai had remained in place. There were many stories surrounding him, since every guard who saw him liked to color the experience in their own way, from one who claimed to have glimpsed him trying to pry apart the cell bars with his hands, to another who had heard him chanting unintelligibly.

But these turned out to be mostly fabricated. True to Mo's words, Ozai did little but crawl around, and was usually either slumped against the wall or sleeping when Kinchil came to deliver food. But when Ozai was awake, those cold amber eyes would latch onto him, sending a jolt down his spine that he could feel even after he left. In just few days, Kinchil mastered an art which the guards at his old prison had bragged about, which was getting in and out of a cell in the space of five seconds.

Nevertheless there was one thing that still pulled his interest towards the high-security floor, and that was the prisoner in Cell 140. Or, as practically everyone called him, Commander Deng. Over the days he proved to be oblivious to nearly everything that was going on around him, focused instead on his one-way dialogues, which would often be well underway even in the early morning. He hadn't been taken outside in over a year and had expressed no interest in doing so. According to Mo, the last time Poon had tried sending Deng out for a walk, Deng had started hurling flames into the air, shouting abuse at some invisible minister.

None of the guards paid him much attention anymore, but Kinchil found himself pausing every so often to listen to what Deng was saying. For some reason, the prisoner required a handful of animal bones in order to make the conversations work. For this he kept emergency stockpiles in the dark corners of his cell, which the guards on sanitary rounds long knew not to touch, on pain of a scolding and clap around the ears. On the days when the cooks only made vegetables, Commander Deng spat and berated Kinchil for not having made port for more cargo yet. But when the kitchens served chicken or fish, the Commander would eagerly snatch it up, ignoring everything else on the plate, and moments later place the clean bones into his hand and light a flame from his palm. He would call to the Dragon-bird spirit, who moments later presumably answered, then move on to talking to someone or something on the 'other side'.

After a few more days of talking to General Po, Commander Deng failed to convince him of his point of view and angrily dropped the contact. He spent the rest of the week either sleeping or searching for another conversation partner, contacting what seemed to be numerous other individuals or spirits he seemed to be passing by. He did all of this while peering into the flame in his hand, which would change between deep red, orange, and bright yellow, the lighter shades of which seemed to correlate with a stronger connection. But he never stayed with any of these conversation partners for too long; every time Kinchil saw him, it seemed, he was searching for someone new.

It continued like this into Kinchil's second week, up to the umpteenth morning shift, when he entered the cell to see the prisoner looking well-rested and sitting up, leaning close to a dim orange flame in his hand. Kinchil placed the tray down, just as Deng reached for a bone that lay beside him and tossed it into his palm, causing the fire to hiss and brighten into yellow. The sight had become so
"Hello? Hello! Dragon-bird, by your good graces, let my voice be carried aloft on your wings and soar over the rift between our worlds! Let me speak to the Fire Lord! Fire Lord Azulon!"

Kinchil paused at the door, eyes widening. After a brief quarrel with himself, he turned back around and tiptoed towards the cage. Commander Deng didn't notice. He was too absorbed in the fire, frowning in contemplation. Suddenly, his face broke out into an ecstatic smile.

"Yes! Fire Lord Azulon! Fire Lord Azu... what?" Deng's smile fell. "He's unreachable? How can that be?" He paused. "I don't understand. I was told he had recently passed... I was certain that he would have crossed over... What do you mean, he's gone? Either he's in the spirit world or in the realm of the departed - it makes no logical sense whatsoever for you to put it like... what?!

Deng went silent again, expression shocked and befuddled. Moments later he grabbed his head and let out a frustrated groan.

Kinchil's heart began to pound. He stood in place, watching the prisoner stare into the fire. After several minutes of no results, Deng finally gave up and smothered it. Before his stay grew prolonged, Kinchil closed the door and pushed the food cart onwards.

It's impossible, Kinchil thought. Azulon's dead. There's no way he could talk to him.

But none of this stopped Deng from trying. As the day wore on, the kitchen received complaints that a certain Number 140 was pushing away vegetable meals, and the guards who came back from lunch and cleanup rounds had scratches and burns on their uniforms. The next day, when Kinchil went up to deliver lunch, Deng was still talking, his voice audible even through his cell door.

"Dragon-bird, this is Commander Deng, currently flying over the Misty Forest in the Realm of Ran! I still do not see the storm you told me about. Are you sure that the wind and thunder was coming from your side and not an interference from the mortal world?... Hold on... I see it! I see it! Dragon-bird, I see the clouds hovering right over the Waterfall, but I cannot tell where they're coming from! Are you not able to see beyond them at all? Hello?"

As always, the flame in his palm was silent. But beneath the visor of his cap, the prisoner's eyes were squinted, as if he were straining to hear something going on on the other end. Beside the cell bars was a breakfast tray untouched. Kinchil removed it and replaced it with the new tray, and though this meal included a whole chicken leg, Commander Deng didn't cast it a single glance.

When Kinchil's shift ended that day, he went to the lower city library and got as many books about firebending and the spirit world as possible. But unfortunately, sources of information on the latter were few. This came to Kinchil as no big surprise - even in the distant Fire Fountain City, books on the occult had been kept under tight lock and key, if stocked at all. The only sources that Kinchil could find that explicitly mentioned the spirit world were children's books, but most of their stories' descriptions were vague and conflicting.

There was always the option that Deng was crazy. But still... the yellow fire. Kinchil had heard stories from his family of people who could produce different-color flames, which had always been said to be linked with profound abilities. And for all he had seen in his twenty-five years, he knew that he'd never dismiss anything without looking into it himself first. Someone had gotten their bending taken away, after all. That had to mean that there was something else beyond the things that mainstream firebending teachers taught, abilities or phenomena that were hiding beyond the shroud of everyday life, like ancient secrets waiting to be rediscovered.

...
The next day, Kinchil had the overnight shift. It started at seven o'clock and lasted until three in the morning, which made it both the most complained-about shift among the Capital City guards, but also the most easygoing, since they got more break times and usually had the next day either off or on evening shift. Back at home, Kinchil might have had the urge to unwisely spend his free morning and afternoon roaming around town, but here, in his tiny apartment in the cramped lower city, it was too easy to let himself stay in and focus inwards.

Kinchil spent the daylight hours eating and resting up, then as soon as the shadow on his sundial watch slipped past six, he changed into his uniform and left. It was already dark when he entered the prison tower, which made the light from the indoor lamps seem murkier than in the daytime. Kinchil wound his way through the first floor and entered the male locker room, where Shen was packing up to leave. The guard removed his helmet to reveal dull, flattened hair, and gave a yawn as he rubbed his face.

"Everything good?" Kinchil asked.

Shen sighed and slammed the locker door. "I need to sleep for three days straight. I can't take another day like this..."

"What's wrong?"

"The Commander's at it again."

Kinchil frowned. "You mean he's still trying to reach Azulon?"

Shen shook his head. "I don't even know what he's doing anymore... It's like he's tapped into a whole new level of crazy." He heaved his sack of belongings over his shoulder. "Well, I'm out. Got tomorrow off, too. See you later." He waved his fingers in a parting gesture and left the room.

After placing his things into his locker, Kinchil went to the kitchen to check on the dinner carts. There were three other guards there already, and upon seeing Kinchil, one of them immediately pushed his food cart over to him. "You get the high-security floor today."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Just do it. I've been doing it all day." The guard took off his helmet and hurried out of the room.

Kinchil sighed, but took the cart and went over to the elevator. When he got up to the high-security floor, he found it in a greater clamor than ever before. Deng's voice was booming through the entire corridor, so loudly that Kinchil could distinguish his words: "Badger Spirit! Tell me what's going on down there! The Dragon-bird got lost in the wind and our connection broke! I tried to reach out to her through the sea again, but the waves are surging and I can't hear anything! The storm must have spread through three realms already! Can you confirm? Hello?"

On top of this, there were several other voices rising beneath Deng's, along with the sound of scorching flames. Kinchil threw open the door to Cell 141 to find the Imperial Firebender grimacing in agony, hurling fireballs at the wall. "Oh, brother, shut him up!" The prisoner pressed his hands to the sides of his head and fell to his knees. Another wordless wail came from Deng's cell. "I can't take it anymore! He's being screaming for three days straight! I can't sleep! What is he, crazy?"

"There's nothing we can do," Kinchil said. "He'll stop when he runs out of bones. Just wait it out."

The Imperial Firebender collapsed against the bars of the cage. Kinchil placed down the tray, and the firebender grabbed a bread loaf and tore off a bite. "Hell on Earth..."
Kinchil left the cell, then sucked in a breath and went back towards the previous one. He kicked open the door and found Commander Deng on his feet, holding his flame in both palms, which was burning so hot and bright that sparks were flying in the air around him. Kinchil took a tray in one hand, held the other arm up to bend away the sparks, and inched over towards the bars.

"Dinner!" he shouted. "Take it!"

The prisoner's gaze tore away from the flame, crazed and desperate. "Are they the bones?"

"No, it's soup today-"

"Get out!" he snarled. "Get out, or I'll throw you overboard!"

"You've skipped three meals already! Eat something!"

But Deng had already zoned him out and turned away towards the opposite wall. He continued to shout things into the fire, sounding as if he were caught in the middle of a typhoon. Kinchil departed the cell in a huff, too busy to be nagged by the fact that he was visiting cells in the opposite order, and pushed open the door to the next one. Deng's shouts were muffled here, but still intelligible, though if it was bothering the prisoner inside, he wasn't showing it. Ozai was leaning against the bars of the cage, turned to face the window on the back wall.

Kinchil approached quietly and placed down the tray. Ozai didn't move to take it. He sat where he was, and for a moment, Kinchil found himself hanging still as well, soaking up the silence. His eyes scanned the blank walls and dusty floor, noticing for the first time the subtle texture of the bricks and their dull, perfect pattern. It really must have felt different, on the other side of the bars...

But moments later, Ozai shifted in place ever so slightly, and Kinchil snapped to his senses and scrambled out of the cell.

After finishing the high-security floor, battered throughout by Commander Deng's shouting, Kinchil descended to the first floor for the pre-shift assembly. Here, the doorways were wider, the rooms brighter. After walking for a moment through a plain stone corridor, he reached a large room with a red-carpeted floor and furniture. Here, the guards from the afternoon shift were having tea in the sitting area and playing Pi Sho. Several ones from the night shift were in the dining area further back, getting ready for their turn. Kinchil stepped through the doorway and saw Ming and Mo at a table. He approached them, and they both turned to him.

"Hey there," said Mo.

Kinchil slumped into the free chair beside them. "He's gone obsessed again."

Ming raised her eyebrows. "Who, Commander Deng?"

Kinchil nodded. "He tried to contact Fire Lord Azulon a few days ago, but the dragon-bird spirit told him that Azulon was unreachable. Then something went wrong with their connection and now Deng's trying to fix it." He leaned his chin on his hands. "Now he hardly even eats anymore. Are you sure we can't take him outside or something? Or at least feed him somehow?"

"He'll eat when he's ready," Mo said. "Trust me. He's not so detached from reality that he'll starve himself."

"How do you know?" said Kinchil. "Right now he doesn't seem like he cares about anything except what he's doing. What if he keeps going like this and doesn't realize it until it's too late?"
Ming put a hand on his shoulder. "Kinchil, relax. I'm not saying be like Warden Poon and spit down on everyone, but you can't let the prisoners get to your head either."

Mo narrowed his eyes at her slyly. "Says the guard who used to sneak General Iroh extra bowls of rice."

Ming's face flushed and she smacked his shoulder. "That was only because I felt bad about how Warden Poon was treating him. And mind you, he was still General Iroh, the Fire Lord's brother. I understand if he broke the law, but he still deserved to be shown respect. He was just pretending to be insane to mess with Poon."

"And now I feel bad for Commander Deng," Kinchil said.

Ming sighed. "I feel sorry for him too, but there's nothing we can do to help him. He lost his mind a long time ago."

But Kinchil shook his head. "I don't think this guy's crazy, Ming. He's got a power. There've always been people who could talk to spirits and make predictions, and sometimes they were treated as the top authorities in their cultures. Azulon himself even acknowledged it. He tried doing a lot of the same things Deng did, and people called him the Great Sage."

Mo shrugged. "Still... Azulon did go a bit crazy towards the end. I mean, he'd shut himself up in his war room for days before battles and ask spirits how to best approach Earth Kingdom cities. Even if all his ministers agreed that something was a bad idea, if a spirit gave Azulon a hint or sign to do it, he'd listen no matter what. Because of him, we lost a lot more people than we should have."

"But he did make predictions that came true," said Kinchil. "He predicted that there would be a storm at Gar Sai just like Deng did, only Deng told the general to wait till it ended, while Azulon told him to attack anyway. Azulon probably just had too much confidence in the spirits' advice, and thought that if he didn't predict a failure, there wouldn't be one."

Ming pondered this, casting her gaze towards the ceiling. "You know, I remember hearing about that Gar Sai storm from one of Azulon's old war advisors. He said Azulon got up from his throne and started saying weird things, like 'I will bring the sun.'"

"And that doesn't sound crazy to you?" said Mo.

Ming shrugged. "Well, something had to make him sure of it."

"Sure that he could literally make the sun break through the clouds?"

Kinchil breathed a sigh. "Look, I'm not saying Azulon didn't make any bad decisions. I'm just saying he believed in the ability, and Deng has that ability."

"Well, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," Mo said. "But I'll only start believing if Deng actually manages to talk to him. Though that would be a bit creepy... And I can't imagine what Azulon would do if Deng got him angry. He'd probably unleash a firestorm on us from the realm beyond." Mo chuckled. Then he sighed. "Honestly, I just hope Zuko doesn't end up like the last three Fire Lords. They all started out normal, but then every single one of them got caught up by some sort of supernatural ideal."

"Well, Zuko's not a normal Fire Lord," said Ming. "No Fire Lord has ever been through a time like this."

Kinchil nodded his agreement. No Fire Lord had ever had the former Fire Lord alive during his
reign. No Fire Lord had ever been imprisoned. And no Fire Lord, as well as Kinchil could remember, had ever had to perform a full-blown cleaning of his government.

The rest of the pre-shift period passed by quietly. They had a final snack and drank some tea to help them stay awake, then they all crowded around the notice board, where Warden Poon tacked a weekly list of assignments for each shift. Kinchil was to stand guard on the third floor, where Poon had just placed a couple of new prisoners. Kinchil went to the equipment room to get a spear, then back to his locker to put on his armor.

He had just finished adjusting his helmet and closed the door to his locker when he heard another heavy metal slam, the unmistakable sound of the hallway door sliding open. Hurried footfalls filled the hallway, and Kinchil poked his head out to see a Royal Police official walking up the hallway, tense and directed. One of the hallway guards scurried after him.

"Sir, I'm telling you, he's had no visitors or any communication since he came here."

"That's still to be determined," the official replied. "His supporters are uniting in three major cities including this one, and as the spearhead of their movement, I can hardly imagine he'd be kept in the dark about it." He headed for the elevator and noticed Kinchil as he passed the lounge. "You. Take me to see Ozai. He's in one of the top-security cells, I believe."

Kinchil tensed. He stepped out of the doorway and cleared his throat. "You need written permission from Warden Poon to visit him. I can't take you unless you have it."

"How about the Fire Lord's?" The official unfurled the scroll in his hands. It was a signed letter. "This is a warrant that Fire Lord Zuko handed personally to me, the captain of the Royal Police. It gives me permission to inquire any federal agency about matters of national security, and since there's a matter at hand that concerns Ozai, I'm obligated to determine his involvement in it."

Kinchil's eyes ran over the handwritten lines, finally finding the Fire Lord's signature at the bottom. The hall guard read over his shoulder as well, then gave a nod. "All right, sir. Follow us."

He and Kinchil led the official to the elevator. When they got to the ninth floor, the hall guard led them around the corridor and began to summon other guards from their stations.

"Quick, come on! We're going to Cell 139."

Whispers rose up from the silence. Four more guards joined their group, while the rest who remained at their posts rearranged themselves to make up for the empty space. Soon Kinchil found himself surrounded by a sea of plated shoulders and spears, powerless as they carried him to the dreaded door.

The hall guard reached to push it open, and the police captain balked.

"What, no locks?"

"No, sir," the hall guard replied. "We don't lock the cell doors, because it's enough to keep the cages locked."

"And if they manage to get out of the cage?"

"That's impossible. The bars run both ways. If a prisoner wanted to get out, they'd have to fit their bodies through a hole the size of a jewelry box."

The police captain narrowed his eyes. "And if they're firebenders?"
This is military-grade steel. They'd exhaust themselves before they could melt down a single drop."

The captain fell silent, though Kinchil could still feel him brooding, searching for a loophole.

The guard inclined his head in response. "You'll see."

He pushed open the door, and the seven men stepped into the dark, musty room. Kinchil lit a flame in his hands and tossed it onto a shelf near the ceiling, where the fire spread to cast a subtle glow over the room. The light touched the hazy outline of a prisoner slumped against the wall. Seeing them, he stirred from his place ever so slightly, and a face appeared from a curtain of black hair.

The captain stepped forward. "I am Captain Lang of the Royal Police. I have come here to ask you a few questions. For the sake of national security and on pain of further prosecution, you are to answer them with complete honesty. First of all, do you or do you not know the whereabouts of a man named Tao Yu?"

The prisoner did not respond.

"Do not test my patience. I'll ask again — do you or do you not know the whereabouts of a man named Tao Yu?"

But the captain's furious tone was met with silence. The prisoner didn't move a muscle, his gaze trailing past the guards and lingering on the wall above their heads, where the flames flickered quietly.

After several seconds of silence, the captain clenched a fist and stepped forward. But the hall guard held him back by the shoulder.

"It's no use. He doesn't talk to anyone."

The captain moved his shoulder away. "I don't care what he will or won't do on your terms. If I'm here, he talks. And if he doesn't, we'll force him."

The guards tensed, exchanging glances. The captain turned away from the cell to look at them. By accident, his gaze found Kinchil, who reflexively looked away and focused on the back of another guard's head. It was a stupid move, but already one that couldn't be taken back. The captain's eyes widened in surprise.

"I don't believe what I'm seeing," he said. "You're actually afraid of him? Afraid of your own prisoner? He can't even firebend!" The captain punched his fist into the air, producing a burst of bright orange flame. The fire illuminated the prisoner's face for a brief moment as he watched impassively.

Kinchil did not move, and neither did the other guards. They all stood in a confused clump, looking at the captain in silence.

"I don't believe what I'm seeing," he said. "You're actually afraid of him? Afraid of your own prisoner? He can't even firebend!" The captain punched his fist into the air, producing a burst of bright orange flame. The fire illuminated the prisoner's face for a brief moment as he watched impassively.

Kinchil did not move, and neither did the other guards. They all stood in a confused clump, looking at the captain in silence.

The captain turned back to them and thrust forward a finger. "Let me tell you something. My family was in the war right from the beginning. Brother, father, uncle, grandfather, everyone. I wasn't much older than many of you were, when I joined. Back then I believed every word people ever told me about fighting - that it would bring me honor, my family honor, and my nation honor. But it was only when I stepped on Earth Kingdom territory myself that I saw what we were doing to the other nations and how much the war was a pointless, selfish struggle to dominate other people. I realized that the same country that preached honor and dignity to its citizens had no problems whatsoever with taking other people's homes and lives. I realized that the line of rulers I was taught to respect has produced nothing but greedy, power-seeking men for generations. Men caught up in the illusion of
their grandeur, willing to sacrifice the well-being of their own people for the sake of pursuing their made-up ideals. Men like him!" The captain pointed into the cell. "Look at him! This is the person who ruined our country's image! This is the person who forced all of you to work for his own gain, throwing away everything that made our nation truly great and turning it into a terror machine! Fire Lord Zuko is doing heroic work by just trying to fix what his ancestors did, but you bunch are afraid of even looking them in the face? Turn around and do it!"

One by one, the guards all fixed their gazes on the prisoner. He was looking back at them without expression, as if the entire scene were just a part of some stage performance.

The captain surveyed them through narrowed eyes. "I think the Fire Lord would be pretty disappointed right now, if he saw this. To see that his own government staff don't have an ounce of the strength he has would be very disheartening. I'll say this to you again — we will find a way to make him talk."

The hall guard gave a resigned nod. "Yes, sir."

The captain turned away towards the exit. The hall guard opened the door and held it as the others filed out, then stepped into the hallway himself and let it swing closed behind them.

"I want that thing locked from now on," the captain said. "You will write down the name of every person who asks to visit him and never leave him alone with anybody."

"Yes, sir."

"The guards will be switched up too, so that he doesn't have contact with a single person for too long of a time."

"It'll be done, sir."

Through the small window in the door, the prisoner watched the group of people leave. Slowly, their voices faded down the hallway, and long after he was left alone in the silence, he continued to sit where he was, not doing so much as scoff at the departing figures who had intruded on his presence. He didn't seem at all affected by the fact that this had been his first outside visit in over a month.

And indeed, he wasn't. Because he knew that the essence of those visits would be one and the same. Everything he could ever expect from the world now had been demonstrated to him in a single moment shortly after his arrival, when his son had leaned down towards the bars of his cell and uttered those words:

"Where is my mother?"

...
He didn't know.

He didn't know, and that was the plainest and most profound way Ozai could have expressed it. It was the answer he would have given if he had stood before his entire war council, or if the Avatar had pinned him down on the rocks and threatened to strike him dead with another elemental beam if he lied.

Still, he knew it was an answer that would never satisfy Zuko. So he had simply glowered, fixing his gaze on the floor while he muttered some nonsense about weakness and sentimentality, after which Zuko left, likely never to return. And frankly, Ozai preferred it that way. He never wanted to see his son again, nor anyone else for that matter, save for some guards he could occasionally make shudder with a scowl. He had gone from the threshold of being the architect of a new world, to being barely above par with the prison rats, and that was a fall that would do little to lighten anyone's countenance.

But more importantly, it was a fall he had never expected. It seemed like just minutes ago that he was standing on the platform of that airship, feeling heat kindle within him as Sozin's Comet drew nearer, and an anxious thrill at the thought that the old world would be no more. It had felt more than real. It had felt inevitable. Failure was something he simply hadn't accounted for, not when battling the Avatar, not even when he had started to realize he was losing. Then, in a single wave, six years' worth of plans and ambition had been swept aside like a tower of sand. Something new had emerged from the rubble, but it was something he hadn't created, something so vast that it surpassed his ability to comprehend it. He saw the fires fade, water rush over the cracks in the scorched land, and the comet flee from the sky, carrying away a century of war and sorrow, collecting all of the world Ozai had known into the streak of flames that trailed behind it. And by some twisted turn of the fates, his son had been that world's last goodbye, standing before his cell in the Fire Lord's royal robes, with the golden firecrown to boot.

The question of Ursa would likely bother Zuko for the rest of his life. The fact that his father refused to cooperate was just a tiny stumbling block at the beginning of a long road. He would keep going, he would keep searching, and even if it took him till his dying day, he would find a way to wrench the slightest hint of her whereabouts from the grips of a relentless world. Zuko was many things, but he wasn't a quitter.

("For so long, all I wanted was for you to love me. To accept me. I thought it was my honor that I wanted, but really, I was just trying to please you. You! My father! Who banished me, just for talking out of turn! My father — who challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, to an Agni Kai. How can you possibly justify a duel with a child?")

Ozai narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the ceiling now, tracing the patterns of rock that stood out from the shadows. There was a slit in the wall behind him, barely as thick as his arm, that served as the jailer's meager offering of a window. Its function wasn't to provide light (for the darkness was such that even the sun's rays seemed to dissipate in it) but rather to make it possible to tell day from night, so that no matter how raving or degraded he became, he'd still have one bit of certainty to keep him from plunging into total madness.

This small gesture of benevolence made him grimace. He used to wonder why Zuko hadn't just flicked a hand and sent him to the Boiling Rock. The old warden was still in charge, and if the rumors were correct, then he was even stricter and grouchier due to the recent breakout. Sitting in a metal cell for days on end, spending extra time in the Cooler without his firebending to sustain him…
the more Ozai had thought about it, the more sense it made that he, the nation's disgrace, should be kept there instead. If Zuko had wanted revenge on him, if he had really wanted to make his father pay for all he had done to him, then he'd have only a bell to ring, or a hawk to send, and everything would be taken care of. But no… after all those years of scorn and hatred and manipulation, all Ozai got was a quiet cell, one that was cool and light at best, dark and damp at worst.

He couldn't make sense of it.

By all accounts, Zuko hated him. He had taken care to make that very clear on the Day of Black Sun, just as his father had always taken care to make clear to him that he despised him, or if not, at least lingered somewhere in the range of 'sorely disappointed'. And suddenly, for the first time in his life, he had gotten his chance for revenge. Ozai had been powerless, his firebending suppressed by the solar eclipse, and was confined to a single room with no security. He wasn't a complete vegetable — he could still fight physically — but against a pair of sharp blades, he knew he wouldn't have lasted long.

By all accounts, Zuko could have killed him.

And for a minute, Ozai had even thought he would. When Zuko had drawn the swords, that tiny, meek boy of the past had suddenly vanished for someone steadfast and powerful, in a change so abrupt that it had caught Ozai off-guard. He was gripped by a strange alarm, and for an instant, he wondered if that really would be the end. And he hadn't been sure how he felt about it. He had sat still as Zuko started talking, all the while drifting in the dark limbo of his thoughts, still tensing with unease whenever Zuko made a sharp gesture.

But soon, the fury in Zuko's words faded, and his speech took a different turn. He began talking about peace and remedying past wrongs. Of Iroh, and of joining the Avatar. Meanwhile, the haze of shock in Ozai's mind had begun to clear, and in its place he felt an old, dormant spite flare up within him, one that had so often been connected with Zuko in the past. (But why?) It started somewhere deep within him and swelled like a slow wave, rising and spreading till it flooded him completely.

He knew what he had to do to keep Zuko in the room, and that was to tell the story. It was the final thing they shared, the last way he could have snapped Zuko out of his resolve and made him lose his focus, even if it was only for a moment.

But in that moment, neither of them were the same.

The sun was dawning on a new world. And as Ozai recounted the events of Ursa's demise, he himself stood beyond them. With every word, Zuko's eyes narrowed at his father in growing spite, and in each pause, Ozai felt the moon wane, the sun slowly crawling to the brink of emergence. His time in the old life had ended. If Zuko wanted to break away, then his selfish father would show him just how generous and encouraging he could be.

If Zuko wanted to be an enemy, Ozai thought, then he could be one.
Ozai lunged from the pedestal, fingers tracing two arcs of lightning through the air, and shot them forward into a massive, brilliant beam that swallowed Zuko whole. But a second later, the bolt swerved away from its target, and Zuko reappeared among a cloud of hissing sparks, which flowed around his body like a river as he directed his arms back at Ozai.

Seconds later, something in front of Ozai exploded, and he was thrown back into the air. He crashed against the tapestry behind him and slid to the ground, and when he looked up, Zuko was gone, leaving only a trail of flames from where the redirected bolt had hit. The guards rushed inside, but Ozai pushed past them all, and went to take command of the city's defense force.

At the time he had been so angry that he could hardly think. From those short minutes, Ozai was certain he had learned everything about his son — that he was a traitor, a liar, and that all his words and actions in the past several weeks had just been a ploy to mask his true face. And that final visit of his was what he had wanted to do since the moment of his return — to declare his upfront, unabashed hatred.

But in reality, it had been something more.

And only now, in the confines of his cell, with the silence back to envelop him, did Ozai realize what it was.

Zuko didn't hate him.

He had simply ceased to care.

He had spent so many years trying to prove himself, that by the time he finally got Ozai's approval, he had been through so much that the teaching of his experiences had stripped his goal of its former allure. They had shown something grand and fearsome to be vapid and hollow, which disillusioned him so much that it left no fuel for hatred. So instead of punishing Ozai, Zuko had discarded him. He locked him up in the Capital City Prison, where he knew it would be easy to keep Ozai in check, and make sure that the crazy man didn't do any more crazy things. By now, Zuko had probably moved on with his life in the every-busy palace, while in a dark, tiny cell nearby, the silence was still echoing from a door that had slammed a month ago.

And now, Ozai knew it couldn't have been any other way.

He could have melted that bunker into a puddle. He could have told Zuko that he had disposed of Ursa personally, or that he had been looming over the boy's bedside just moments before she had come to stop him from fulfilling Azulon's fateful orders. But it wouldn't have made Zuko stay.

So now, as always, Ozai contented himself with having made him go.
The next day, the metal food cart made its way up the ninth-floor hallway. Kinchil pushed open the door to the Phoenix King's cell and slid a lunch tray up to the bars.

A shape stirred in the darkness and a pair of eyes opened to glare at him. They were filled with such anger and revulsion that Kinchil flinched out of reflex, thinking he had done something deeply insulting. The shock ran its course through him as usual, but as he turned to leave it faded for an exhaustion, and he found himself wondering how someone could hold that much loathing inside of them.

But as Kinchil was about to step through the door, something compelled him to stop and take a glance back. The prisoner had moved towards the tray and taken the bowl. The anger had vanished from his face like a mirage, and he was sullenly stirring his soup, clearing the gruel to look at the vegetables.
The next morning, Ozai woke up on his back with the thin, rag-like blanket wrapped around him. Sunlight was sifting through the window above, and he heard the hiss of wheels and clang of trays fading down the hallway.

He pushed himself up by the elbow and crawled over to the edge of his cell, looking down at the offerings. Mushy rice and bland-colored vegetables. With a grumble, he took the bowl and settled back onto his mat, hardly an inch from where he had been before.

Once upon a time, he had trained every day. He had practiced firebending for hours longer than his tutors prescribed, gradually matching his brother's talent through sheer discipline. Then he had used those skills to craft a fighting style of his own, supplementing the bending forms with acrobatic moves that others couldn't accomplish, and was satisfied with knowing that he could take on any challenger, even if none came.

Now, Ozai sat slumped against the wall, fiddling with the chopsticks, stretching out the meal for as long as he could to minimize the time he would waste away sleeping. Once he would finish eating, he would look over the bowl and see if there were any markings left by prisoners of the past, and wonder what a coincidence it was that precisely this piece of metal had one day been molded into something he would eat from, and what the metalworker would have thought, had he known.

But just a few minutes later, his thoughts were interrupted by a loud bang. Ozai looked up to see his cell door swing open, spilling a flood of torchlight into the room and revealing the silhouettes of several guards. One of them stepped forward.

"Get up, Thirty-Nine! You're coming with us."

Ozai frowned at the unusual command. The guards had only recently started taking him out for exercise, and even so, they never did it this early in the day. Judging by the stripe of sunlight that glowed on the wall, it was only a few hours after sunrise, whereas his regular time (when it came at all) was in the afternoon. That was when the stripe would vanish, and not long after, a couple of guards would come clunking in to take him away.

But these guards looked different - they were tense and rushed. As they closed in on the cell, Ozai rose to his feet, lowering his gaze mutely as the cage door was opened. One of the guards clasped metal cuffs around his wrists, and two others took him by the arms and led him out. The final guard trailed behind them with a spear in his hand.

Their pomp was admirable, but in vain. Even if he had tried to escape, Ozai knew he wouldn't have gotten far. After five weeks in prison, he had grown lazy and lethargic, and was starting to get unusual reminders about his battle with the Avatar, like small, random aches in his joints, and a back that would pang in protest whenever he twisted it the wrong way. The more time that passed, the more incredible it seemed to him that he had lasted as long as he had, especially after he had triggered that horrid Avatar State.

He could have pestered the guards to provide him with healing, or demand proper-sized food portions, especially during the first few weeks, when the arrangement hadn't seemed completely real. Some of the guards had still feared him then. And none of them had actually seen how the battle had gone, so he could have made his defeat seem as slight and accidental as he wanted. But his heart hadn't been in it.
The guards' footsteps pattered quietly through the hallway, and Ozai followed along, watching their shadows flicker between the torches. After all this time, he still couldn't get used to the numbness he felt when he passed by fire. It was as if the soul in the flames had died, leaving only a surface warmth passing over his skin. There was no connection, no feeling of his life force mingling with that of the fire and becoming one with it. Early on, he had tried to fix himself. He had punched at the air, he had breathed, he had mediated. He had done the most basic firebending forms he knew, the ones taught to fragile children who could hardly make an ember. None of it had worked. The chi in his body was still there, but he had lost his ability to manipulate it.

After a short walk, the guards reached the end of the high-security hallway and turned into a narrower wing, lined with heavy iron doors. They stopped beside one and opened it, revealing a small, brightly-lit room, furnished with a metal table and chairs. Behind the table stood the police captain from the day before. He had his hands behind his back and wore a placid expression. Beside him sat a junior captain, with a blank scroll and quill.

The guards who held Ozai's arms sat him down across from the captain and positioned themselves on either side of his chair. The others left the room, clearing from view to leave the captain at the center of Ozai's vision. The captain frowned in acknowledgment. There were a few metallic whirs as the locks from outside clicked into place, then the captain cleared his throat and placed a long, narrow scroll box onto the table.

"We are going to show you some pictures of people who were in your service," he said. "You are to tell us if you recognize them and say anything else that you know about them."

He removed the lid to reveal a number of scrolls stacked up inside and unrolled one for Ozai to see. It portrait of a man, with early-grayed hair and spiky sideburns.

A catalogue of faces opened in Ozai's mind, six years' worth of plans, meetings, and viewpoints. He thought of playing dumb, of complementing the probably widespread rumors of his physical feebleness with the mental counterpart as well, and puncture a neat hole in whatever plans the captain had for him. At the very least, it would make the interview shorter. But right then, the noble's name resurfaced, and some stubborn part of him made him say it out loud. "Ruon, governor of South Chung-Ling," he answered.

"Is that all?"

"I assure you, being a governor is a great enough responsibility on its own."

The captain paused. "And did he do his job well?"

"Yes."

"Elaborate."

"He was organized," Ozai said. "Loyal. Efficient."

"So, he satisfied you and enjoyed being in your service."

"Had he not, I would not have made him the governor."

"I see." The captain looked down and adjusted the picture on the table. "And what do you know about him, personally?"

"Noble by birth. Family with a long history of service to the palace." With each monotone word Ozai spoke, the junior captain leaned over the scroll and made notes, scratching neat strokes on the
paper with his quill. Meanwhile, the picture of Ruon lay on the table, gazing sternly up at the ceiling. His office had probably been ransacked, he himself put to trial. Perhaps his fate was in question that very moment and they were using Ozai's testimony to figure out what to do with him. How brilliant someone must have seemed, suggesting that the old Fire Lord help wipe his own trace from the palace.

After a while, the scratching quill stopped, and the captain looked at Ozai anew. "What about his political career? Was Ruon given high positions by virtue of his birth, or did he have to progress through the ranks?"

"He progressed," Ozai said.

"What work did he do before you appointed him as governor?"

"He assisted the former governor."

"And before that?"

"He was the royal ambassador to South Chung-Ling."

"Before that?"

"An adviser at the palace."

"Before that?"

"An aspiring adviser at the palace."

"Before that?"

"In a crib, presumably."

The scratching quill stopped all of a sudden, and the junior captain looked away, as if stifling a snicker. But the captain didn't flinch. If anything, this seemed to set his sternness even deeper. He began to pace around his side of the table, rubbing his chin.

"Was Ruon ever a member of your elite inner circle?" he finally asked.

"There was no inner circle," Ozai said.

The captain frowned. "But there had to be some nobles you gave more sensitive information to than others."

"Ruon was not one of them."

"Then what about this man?" The captain rummaged through the box and pulled out another scroll. This one showed a noble of similar age, with black hair and a few wrinkles around his eyes. "Ukano, Governor of New Ozai. Is there anything you can tell me about him?"


The captain laid the sketch down beside Ruon's. "From what I've gathered, Ukano came from a quiet city, fairly distant from the capital. Yet he quickly ascended to political power and gained notoriety through a series of civil accomplishments. And he expressed no concern over the colonization of foreign lands by the Fire Nation. Is that correct?"
"I thought I had made myself clear," Ozai said. "He was the governor of New Ozai. Therefore he supported the existence of New Ozai."

"So he clearly expressed enthusiasm for serving the palace?"

"Yes."

"And he never enjoyed any special privileges or favoritism from you?"

Ozai looked away at the wall. "No."

He didn't bother adding that Ukano was the father of Mai, one of Azula's friends, and that this might have led him to check up on him from time to time and make sure his career was secure. Or that he remembered the girl coming to their courtyard earlier than usual one day, when Zuko approached and said that Azula would arrive soon. The girl had blushed. Zuko hadn't noticed.

(be one, be one, BE one!)

A scowl passed over Ozai's face, and after a moment of more silence, the captain crossed his arms. "I find it hard to believe that there wasn't a single person you trusted more than your other ministers. Not a single person you could name that was more loyal to you than the others."

"You are deluded," Ozai answered. "Loyalty does not come in degrees. One is either loyal, or is not."

The captain gave a shrug. "Then why bother ranking your officials at all? Why not give your secretary the keys to the city?"

"Because a secretary has no need for them. You confuse prestige with duty. I am telling you that there was no prestige, only duty."

At this, the captain's eyebrows climbed. "Then what about your little Phoenix King plan? That seems mighty prestigious, becoming ruler of the world. There had to be some people you were going to promote to help you govern such a large territory." He swept his hand suggestively towards the two portraits. "Or were you just going to do it alone? Did you figure that since you were the Fire Lord, there wasn't any need to bother with everyone else, since they were all insects compared to you?"

Ozai scowled. The captain waited a few moments for a response, and when he didn't get one, he leaned away from the table and continued to pace around. "Fine, then. What about the meetings? Surely you had to collaborate on your plan with somebody."

"Obviously," Ozai said.

"How did the plan come about, then? Did somebody suggest it?"

"I devised it myself. General Shinu reported that the residents of the occupied Earth Kingdom territories were rebelling. Even with Ba Sing Se conquered, the people refused to accept our victory. So I decided that we needed to destroy their hope of rescue."

"And was that the meeting where you formed the whole plan?"

"No. That meeting was the conception. After the Black Sun invasion was defeated, I called several other meetings to turn the plan into a feasible course of action."

"And everybody approved of the plan?"
"Yes."

"Did it ever seem like some people didn't?"

"No."

The captain lifted an eyebrow. "That's very interesting, because under questioning, many of the people who accompanied you on your airships renounced you."

Ozai made no response. They could annex themselves to the undersea kingdom for all he cared. Descend on submarines and live among the fishes. The only thing he wanted now was to go back to his cell, find some comfortable position on his mat, and sleep off the rest of the day. But the captain seemed to be getting more worked up by the minute, walking around his side of the room and peering at Ozai from various angles.

"Did you and your ministers ever come to an agreement that if you failed, some of them would continue the plan on your behalf?" he said.

"No."

The captain looked astonished. "What, so you had no back-ups at all?"

"No."

"Then what were you expecting everyone else to do if you were struck down?"

"I had no reason to speculate."

"So you had no idea that the Avatar was alive?"

"No."

"And did your generals share the same confidence in your plan as you did?"

"Presumably."

"What do you mean, 'presumably'? Did any of them express doubts at your meetings?"

"No."

"So they just sat back and went along with everything you said?"

"No."

"Then explain what they did!"

Ozai jerked his head up at the captain and snarled. "Obviously the plan involved compromises. I had to consult with engineers to construct airships with the necessary capacity. I had to work with my generals to determine the best places to burn the land, the location for our eventual descent, and the procedure for the aftermath. In listening to their ideas and objections I gained a better idea of how to proceed. But nobody questioned the task of burning the Earth Kingdom, because that was what we had come to discuss in the first place — the task of burning the Earth Kingdom."

"Don't play word games with me," the captain said. "I'm not asking you whether they agreed with every little detail of your operation. I'm asking you whether they agreed with the Phoenix plan in principle."
"Presumably," Ozai said through his teeth.

"Based on what?" the captain pressed. "Did the generals agree with all of your plans before?"

"Hardly."

"But which of them were you most like-minded with?"

"Inconsequential."

"To you perhaps, but not to me," the captain said. "Answer."

Ozai's eyes flashed venomously. The captain set his jaw. "Fine. If you need help, I'll go down the list for you." He unrolled another scroll from the box and read from it. "General Shinu. Why was he was promoted and from what?"

"Former commander of the Pouhai Stronghold, promoted due to competence," Ozai said.

"Shen?"

"Former commander, demonstrated strategic competence in battles."

"Bujing?"

"War minister to Azulon. Kept for his skills and memory."

The captain's eyes lit up. "And wasn't he the general Prince Zuko had a dispute with three years ago, which caused the prince to get banished?"

Ozai gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"And how did Bujing react when Prince Zuko returned?"

"He made no reaction."

"Would he have any reason to detest Prince Zuko's rule now?"

"Ask Bujing."

"I am asking you," the captain said. "If everybody welcomed Prince Zuko to the first meeting, why wasn't he there for the ones after the invasion?"

"He abandoned his allegiance to the cause."

"But he voiced no disagreement when he was at the first meeting?"

"No."

"And nobody commented on Prince Zuko's absence?"

"No."

"Then Prince Zuko must have made a public statement beforehand, saying he wouldn't come."

"He didn't."

"Then how did you find out that he wouldn't be there?"
Ozai clenched his fists. "He abandoned his allegiance to the cause!"

"I already gathered that you knew. I am asking you how!" The captain pounded the table with his fist. By now, the junior officer was biting his lip, writing in frantic shorthand to keep up with the conversation. "Did Prince Zuko expressly say so at any point? Did he confide the information to anybody in the palace? Or could the generals have formed a plot to keep him away from the meetings?"

"Fool!" Ozai shouted.

"Because from what you've told me, that seems like a pretty lax attitude for your generals to have about the Crown Prince," the captain said. "Not to mention, one who was banished for three years, then brought back with no notice and declared a hero."

"Then you have answered your own question," Ozai snapped. "The generals were not surprised at the prince's behavior because the prince was in a position of esteem and could be presumed to know what he was doing."

"And yet, it's still a presumption." The captain narrowed his eyes. "I want to know what your ministers thought of Prince Zuko. Every single one of them. Particularly, I want to know their opinions of him before his banishment."

"Varied," Ozai said.

"What was the one you sought to uphold?"

"I upheld nothing."

"But you observed, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And what did you observe?"

"Variation."

The junior captain pushed aside a scroll of messy, jagged scrawl and unrolled a new one. He frantically dipped his quill into the ink bottle to begin another page, spilling several drops from the shaking tip. But fortunately, the captain laid a hand on his arm to stop him. "It's fine, you don't have to write anymore." He pulled away the ink bottle and took the clean scroll into his hands. After some thought, he placed them both in front of Ozai. "Unchain his hands, please," he said to the guards. "He's going to write something for me."

There was a moment's delay, then the guards approached Ozai and unchained his wrists. Then they pushed his chair closer towards the table.

"Write down the names of every general present in the meeting where Prince Zuko spoke out," the captain said. "And sign it when you're done."

Ozai cast the captain a glare, then took the quill. He wrote eight names, signed his, then pushed the scroll away.

The captain read the paper over and nodded. "Interesting. Now I have another question for you. When you decided it was time for you to become the Phoenix King, why did you name your daughter the new Fire Lord instead of Prince Zuko?"
"Greater competence," Ozai replied. Then, a moment later, he narrowed his eyes. "And if my memory does not fail me, that decree was made public. How do you expect the new Fire Lord to deal with it?"

"He already dealt with it," the captain said. "He defeated Princess Azula in an Agni Kai during Sozin's Comet."

These words drifted off into the silence, dissolved moments later by the sound of rustling paper. But to Ozai, they seemed to hang in the air, slowly seeping into his mind till they cast a numbing haze over his surroundings.

So. That was why.

He felt something shift inside of him, and he looked down at his hands, blinking slowly. Azula losing was impossible by only a margin less than Zuko winning. For as long as he had watched them, she had always been the sharper one, the quicker one. Add ten years of firebending training and there was simply no comparing Azula's sober, expert skill to Zuko's fledgling rashness. But then, Ozai remembered the boy with the swords. The one who had stood his ground. The one who had blasted him into a wall and left him to smolder in his own flames.

For a moment, Ozai saw himself on the pedestal again, looking up through the fence of fire that burned around him. Then, his stupor dissolved into a grimace and he closed his eyes.

Inevitable. All of it. Since the day he was banished…

But suddenly, a loud bang tore him from his thoughts. "Pay attention!"

Ozai looked up. The captain was staring down at him angrily, a fist curled on the table. "I asked you, did your ministers ever group themselves into factions with the aim of influencing your policy?"

Ozai gritted his teeth. "I do not know."

"Strange, for a Fire Lord! Are you really telling me that you weren't aware of something going on in your own palace?"

Ozai didn't answer.

"I'm waiting."

Ozai sat still.

The captain narrowed his eyes. "What, you don't have any idea? Not even the slightest clue?"

Silence.

The captain remained where he was for a while, boring his gaze into Ozai's. But Ozai didn't flinch. After a minute, the captain leaned away from the table. "So. You really do have nothing to say."

Ozai narrowed his eyes. The man was looking at him with a clouded expression, as if he were pondering something. Finally, after a long silence, the captain gave a slow nod.

"I think I understand…" he said. "That throne was all you had. You dealt with people's issues while you had it, but beyond it, there was no meaning in anything for you. Beyond their functions, people meant nothing. Your country meant nothing. Even your own allies meant nothing." He scooped the scrolls back into the box and closed it. "I'm done here," he said to the guards. "You can take him..."
back to his cell now. Let him finish whatever's left of the life he's been spared." The captain walked away towards the door. Midway, he stopped, fixing his gaze on Ozai a final time. "If there's anything left of it at all."

He turned away and reached to knock on the door.

In a flash, Ozai jumped out of his chair, lunged away from the table, and rammed his fist into the captain's nose. The man swayed back, hands flying to his face, but before he could fall Ozai grabbed him by the collar and punched him again. He had time for one more — a clobber that knocked the man to the floor — before a guard caught his arm and held it back.

"Stop!" The guard started to force Ozai's arms behind his back, but Ozai pulled free and shoved him away. He turned back to the captain and pulled him off the ground, but before he could punch him again, one of the red-sleeved arms shot out and hit him in the jaw. Two hands pushed Ozai back, and he skidded towards the table and collided with the edge. But Ozai pushed himself off, lunging at the captain again and swinging his arm. This time, however, the captain caught his fist and locked his grip around it. Ozai retaliated with the other, but the captain caught that one as well, and they pushed against each other for a while, inching back and forth.

Sucking in a breath, Ozai leaned back, heaving both feet into the air, and kicked the captain in the stomach. The captain flew back, bumping against the wall, and doubled over. Ozai fell to the floor, then quickly crawled away and rose to his feet. The two guards rushed towards him, but Ozai swept out his leg and toppled them. Meanwhile, the junior captain knelt beside the captain and helped him up. The captain lifted his head, revealing a red, livid face, completely devoid of its former composure. As soon as he locked eyes with Ozai, he slipped out of the junior captain's grip and ran forward. Ozai met him in a few strides, and they plunged into a blur of jabs and swipes, striking each other everywhere they could.

The other people in the room were reduced to clumps of noise in the background, fleeing as the men fought with their hands and feet, shoving each other against the table and walls. Just when Ozai would grab hold of the captain's shoulder plates and ram him into the table, the captain would push away from it and knock him into a chair. Soon, the pauses Ozai took between attacks grew longer, and increasingly often he'd find himself drifting off into a strange contemplation, wondering whether he had always felt this sluggish and whether he was imagining how his hands kept getting slapped away before they reached their target. And each time he snapped back to reality, Ozai became aware that he was stepping back, slowly switching from attacking to defending, while the captain's blows came closer and closer to his body. Finally, one of his fists flew out and smacked Ozai square in the face, and Ozai staggered back, shock blooming inside of him. He barely saw it as the captain curled his arm again and prepared to deliver the final blow.

Ozai turned to the side in haste, aiming to step behind the captain and end up behind his shoulder. But his motions were too slow, and hardly a moment after he started the turn, he felt the captain's fist draw close to his head. Out of reflex, Ozai closed his eyes and ducked, spinning around the rest of the way until he had his back to the captain. Taking another breath, he turned around, curling his fist for a retaliating blow. But the captain was gone.

Ozai stared at the empty wall for a moment. Then, something flitted out from beneath one of the torches and struck him in the eye.

His vision went white, then red. Ozai staggered back as if through water, gaze rolling up towards the ceiling. He hardly noticed how he tipped over his own heels, but soon he was already falling, and by the time his mind caught up to his body something sharp and hard stabbed into the side of his head. There was a moment of searing pain, then it let go and he slumped to the floor.
Seconds later, Ozai opened his eyes and found his cheek pressed against the smooth, sandy stones. From somewhere far away, he heard the guards scurrying around.

"Stop it! Now!"

Hands lifted him from the ground. The room swam back into view, glowing and swimming in stars. The junior captain stood in a corner with his scrolls bunched up in his arms. Nearby, the captain was wiping his mouth. The anger had dropped clean from his face, and now he was looking at Ozai in utter bewilderment. Ozai met his gaze with a snarl, and right then, he felt something warm trickle down the side of his face.

He started to murmur something, but a guard turned him away and pushed him through the open door. The second guard took Ozai's other arm moments later, and they led him down the hallway. Ozai marched along, still scowling at the floor. After the sudden rush of energy, he now felt slow and heavy. At one point, he stopped and reeled forward, but the guards pulled him upright.

"Keep moving!"

They descended several flights of stairs, passed through another corridor, and finally reached a long, dimly-lit room. Here, there were several tiny cells spaced along either wall, each containing a single bed. The guards sat Ozai down on one of them, then an elderly healer approached and began to dab the spot of wet pain on Ozai's head. After a moment, Ozai looked down. Blood was dripping from his hair. It had stained his shirt. The doctor was taking more of it with every wad of gauze he pulled away.

The captain's face swam back into Ozai's mind, narrow-eyed and calculating.

All you had. Nothing without it.

Ozai vowed to hate the man until his dying day.

He sat still while the doctor worked, cleaning up the wound then dabbing it with ointment. Finally, he threaded a large needle and began to sew up the cut. When he was done, he laid Ozai down and moved the pillow beneath his head.

"He should stay the night. He can go back to his cell tomorrow."

The guards murmured in agreement. The doctor locked the cell door and pushed his supply cart away into the depths of the room.

Left alone, Ozai lay on his back, listening to the dull throbbing in his head. Painful as it was, it cleared his mind. Soon, his thoughts untangled themselves and settled back into their usual pattern. Koans. Folk stories. Next meal…

Time passed in stillness. Occasionally, there was a rustle of sheets from the other side of the room as a prisoner shifted in one of the beds. Ozai heard murmuring, and often saw the man lift two bandaged hands and tug anxiously at the gauze. Then he'd flip over onto his other side and settle down.

After a few hours, the door to the infirmary opened, and a guard came in with a mop and bucket. It was the man with the long ponytail, the one who often did food rounds on Ozai's floor. The guard strolled towards the back of the room and began to wash the floor in the corner, slowly working his way towards the front cells. As he came close to the other occupied bed, the prisoner suddenly jerked up and reached out to him.
"Bones! Bones, son! I need the bones!"

The guard shook his head. "No. We're not having any meat today or tomorrow. You'll have to wait." He started to mop again, but then he seemed to notice a look of dejection on the prisoner's face and gave a sigh. "Bones are what got you here in the first place. If you keep burning yourself with that fire trick of yours, the warden might make it so that you don't get any meat with bones at all. So calm down." He picked up the bucket and moved on.

As he passed by Ozai's cell, the guard lifted his gaze involuntarily and found Ozai's face. His eyes widened, and he quickly dropped his gaze.

He moved on to clean the floor beneath the worktables that stood near the front, and moments later, the door to the infirmary creaked open again. Another guard poked his head inside.

"Hey, Kinchil. Dinner rounds are starting soon."

The guard with the ponytail nodded. "All right. Just let me finish up." He soaked up the remaining water, wrung out the mop, and lifted the bucket. The other guard stepped inside slightly, and they met near the door.

"I can't believe it," the newcomer murmured. "Two high-security prisoners in one day."

"I know. I heard a few people talking... What exactly happened?"

"Ito said there was a fight. The captain of the Royal Police came to interrogate him again."

"Oh."

The newcomer looked over to the other cell. "What happened to the Commander?"

"He talked with the Dragon-bird spirit too long and burned himself."

The newcomer chuckled dryly. "So he's still trying to contact Azulon, huh?"

"Yep."

Ozai's eyes widened. From behind the door, he heard the newcomer sigh. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. A few months ago, he got obsessed with connecting to some obscure sage and spent two weeks debating cosmology."

"I wonder what he wants from Azulon so badly, then," the other guard muttered.

"Probably to rub something in his face."

"Heh..."

With that, the guards filed out of the room and let the door fall closed.

Lingering in the resulting silence, Ozai tuned back into his thoughts and became aware that his pulse had quickened. He lifted his head from the pillow and squinted. The other patient was still asleep. But his head was turned towards the torchlight, revealing a mop of brown hair and a tangled beard. Ozai lowered his head back down.

He slept through the rest of the night, and the next morning, the doctor sat him up and dabbed his face with a warm towel. He inspected the stitches, then tied a thick white cloth around Ozai's head. Two guards lifted him up and helped him towards the door.
Ozai walked slowly, and upon nearing the other patient's cell, he squinted and peered inside. Its occupant was awake. He was sitting up and staring pensively at his lap, but as Ozai passed by, he looked up. Despite his degraded state, the man's eyes seemed to gleam. The two of them held contact for a moment, then the man seemed to lose interest and looked away, muttering to himself some more. But his face remained impressed in Ozai's mind, and long after he left the infirmary, Ozai continued to ponder it.

And remembered him.
Therapy Sessions

The hospital's damage assessment was bleak. Azula's flames had blackened the entire hallway and melted the knobs on most of the doors. The furniture in the back room had been nearly reduced to cinders. There were burns on the ceiling of the room where she had used lightning.

Nevertheless, Dr. Low was surrounded by an air of optimism. He ordered new furniture and changed the locks on all the doors, reducing the number of keys the nurses had to carry. Mira color-coded her keys and melted together the edges of her keychain so that nothing would fall loose. Kira busied herself with keeping everyone on schedule, and Nira helped sort ingredients and stock mixtures for Isla. None of the trio ever bickered with each other or cast Azula an accusing glance again. Someone seemed to have given them a talking-to, and now they simply went about their work, heads bowed in cooperation, ignoring the black and brown torch marks that leered in the background until they were finally painted over by the repair crew.

Thus, over the days, the former storage building was slowly transformed into a passable version of its new self. Azula's routine went on through sounds of construction, her wheelchair pushed past teams of uniformed workers. She watched one morning as the men took down the steel shutters from her window and replaced them with wooden ones, which could be opened anytime with a twist handle on the side. Her window showed a bigger slice of shore than the back one, this time with a few palm trees and stones, and smooth, unmarked gray sand that blurred beneath the waves that lapped in the distance.

Now that she finally saw the hospital place for what it was, the strange dread and intrigue Azula had formerly felt towards it had faded. The locked storage closets really were just locked storage closets, and the shadows that veiled the rooms at night only hid the cobwebs that the overworked nurses hadn't yet gotten to. The more often she was wheeled up and down the hallway, the more Azula realized how small the building really was. On her side, there was her bedroom, a bedroom for the three nurses, a lounge, and the check-up room. On the other side was Dee's office, the other nurse's living quarters, a lounge, a lab for Isla, and Dr. Low's office. The family wing of the palace alone was over three times as big. But Azula no longer felt a longing to return to it.

On the routine side of things, the round of mind-games the nurses had put her through wasn't repeated. Azula spent her occupied time either stacking cards in the therapy room under the supervision of a half-attentive Nira or doing recovery exercises with Dee. What she supposed she liked about the therapist was that she didn't chatter - she simply told Azula what to do, then watched her do it. Once she could get past her slight annoyance at the therapist's bluntness, and the slight aversion to being constantly touched and examined, Azula found that the exercises helped numb her still often-scrambling thoughts. Moreover, the sessions seemed to be progressing into some sort of plan. Dee exercised each muscle group over the days and had her do advanced poses for regular analysis, after which Azula found that some of her former flexibility had gone, but that she was feeling slightly stronger, even with the serum working.

Then, at the beginning of the new week, Isla came in with Azula's breakfast tray. Azula could already tell from afar which of the five or so assortments of food it contained and prepared for another monotone, solitary meal - but instead of handing the tray to her, the nurse pulled out the round wooden table from its place in the corner and set the tray down on one of the place mats. She followed by positioning the single wooden chair down in the spot across from it.

"Dr. Low will be talking with you today," Isla said, looking over her shoulder.

Azula frowned in surprise. "About what?"
"He's going to be giving you regular talk therapy now."

Azula scowled. "Why? Because of what I did? I thought he said himself he didn't blame me!"

Isla shook her head. "No, that's not why. This is just a part of your program. He wants to get to know you better."

Azula gave a hmph. "I bet Zuko told him enough already..." She crossed her arms as Isla wheeled her chair up to the table.

"Just relax," the nurse said over her shoulder. "He really just wants to help."

Azula lifted her head and looked at her. Isla looked back without saying anything, then finally stepped away and went towards the door. Questions and uncertainties began to crop up in Azula's mind, but before she could have time to think them over, Dr. Low walked in himself. He sat down in the chair across from her and placed a small notebook down in front of him. "Good morning."

Azula lifted her eyebrows grimly, then lowered them. "I guess."

Dr. Low gave a small smile. He opened the notebook and began to flip through pages of handwritten text. Azula lifted her chin a little to get a closer look. "Let me guess. A dossier? Tips from Zuko on how to crack me?"

"There are simply what I've written about your schedule, therapies, and medicine doses. They're not that interesting. You can have a look if you want." He slid it over to her.

Azula looked through the pages and saw that it was indeed what he said. "But then how are you going to do therapy on me? You don't even know what happened!"

"I know the gist of it," said Dr. Low. "But I was hoping you'd tell me the rest."

Azula scowled. "Why should I?"

"It will make you feel better."

"Talking to you?"

"Talking to anyone."

"And why should that be you, of all people?"

"Well, you don't seem to have been very open with people in the past. And I'm the one you're stuck with now, so at any rate, I'll have to do." He folded his arms on the table.

Azula pressed her hands to her head. "But why? What does Zuko want from this? And how are you supposed to help me with anything if all you do is talk to me? If I'm sick like everyone says, then it's pointless trying to cure me! I was born like this!"

Dr. Low frowned and sipped his tea. "First of all, not all illnesses are acquired through birth. And second of all, forget that I ever said the words 'hospital' or 'sick' or 'healing'. Nira, Mira, and the others are called nurses because they have training in physical medicine. It's not their job to deal with any other part of your treatment, save for following the instructions I give them. Yes, I told them to give you tests and games that probably seemed silly or pointless to you, since you were capable of reasoning and clear thought. I never doubted that you were - I simply wanted to give you a chance to calm down and orient yourself in your new location. Now that that's past us, I'm going to start doing
the real work."
"Which is talking to me?"
"Yes."

"But why? To tell Zuko or something?"

"No, Azula. To hear it in your own words. Zuko isn't in any way involved with what I'm doing here.
I won't be sending anything to him except for a general monthly report on how things are going. And
if it makes you more comfortable, I'll lock my notes in your room so you'll never have to worry that
I'm doing something with them."

Azula put her elbow on the table and grumbled. A quiet shuffle of footsteps made her look up, and
she saw Isla come back into the room with a large tray of breakfast items in her hands. She set a cup
of tea before each of them, followed by a breakfast plate for Dr. Low. Finally, she added a small
bowl of cookies. When she left again, Azula's gaze drifted down to them, and after a moment, she
took one of the cookies and bit off a piece of it. "Well, you know what happened," she said. "I lost to
Zuko. I guess it made me feel bad." She finished chewing and swallowed. "I'm not used to losing,
especially not to him, so I guess that did it for me."

"Was it always like that between you two?" said Dr. Low. "Did you constantly feel like you had to
be better than him?"

Azula took a second cookie and bit off half. "I always was better than him. The only competition,
really, was him trying to catch up."

Dr. Low wrote some things down. "Did you try to stay better than him?"

"No, I just was."

"In whose eyes?"

Azula shrugged. "Everyone's, I guess. Our dad's. The teachers'. Even Zuko's." She popped the rest
of the cookie into her mouth and gulped down some tea.

"Was there anybody who, on the contrary, was more impressed by Zuko, or treated you both the
same?"

Azula paused. "Our mom."

She let the word skate off of her tongue simply, but felt a slight uneasiness as Dr. Low made more
notes. "And did that bother you?" he asked.

Azula paused again. "Sometimes."

Dr. Low nodded, but he didn't seem to attach any significance to her mentioning of Ursa, and moved
on. "Did you feel like you had to keep proving something to the people who expected a lot of you?"

Azula scowled. "Well, of course. You try being the Fire Lord's granddaughter. You have to set an
example for your peers by doing well in school, and you have to be at least a decent firebender,
otherwise you'd shame pretty much all of your ancestors. If you don't have what it takes to be really
great, though, then you have to excel in something else, like martial arts. Because if you laze around
all day and don't work on developing any of your skills, you'll make the family look bad. And the
Fire Nation too, by extension."
Dr. Low nodded. "So you've always striven to perfect yourself in order to set a good example for other people."

"No, not for anyone else," Azula emphasized. "I did it for me."

"For yourself."

"Yes." Azula crossed her arms. "Just for me. Because I like firebending. I like fighting. I like training, and I like the fact that I'm good at it. I'd never do anything else even if someone gave me a chance to, and I'd never stop working on my skills even if people didn't like me for them."

Dr. Low nodded. "So you felt secure and happy with the role you had to fulfill."

"Yes."

"Did any part of it ever feel forced, or cause you more stress than you would have liked?"

"No. It came naturally," Azula said. "Like I said, I didn't want to do anything else. I'm not your pretty little doll-cuddling, flower-picking child." She cast her gaze off to the side. "I burned flowers and hung them upside-down from my ceiling. They looked prettier that way. But some people thought that was crazy."

"Like Zuko?"

A smile tugged at Azula's lips. "Yeah, like Zuko. And Mom too." She paused again for a moment, then looked away. "But that was their problem."

Dr. Low nodded and made some more notes. "Who taught you to generate lightning?"

Azula grumbled. "My father. He showed me the technique. Then he had me practice it with Lo and Li. They're two old ladies at the palace. They can't firebend, but they know all about the art, and they even taught my father and uncle when they were younger." She narrowed her eyes at Dr. Low, who was still writing stuff down. "What, do you think it's wrong? Monstrous? Like I'm not supposed to know all these things just because I'm fourteen and overtrained?"

Dr. Low looked at her and frowned. "I never said that. There's nothing wrong with cultivating an ability, if you have an ability and enjoy using it in a beneficial manner. I don't understand where the word 'monstrous' comes into play, but I don't see a reason to use it. In fact, firebending training has to start early, especially if the child has talent, because otherwise they could eventually become too lax about using their powers and hurt themselves or other people." He flipped a page. "For what it's worth, I'm able to generate lightning as well, though I learned it later than you did. I haven't done it in a while, of course, because there's no need for lightning generation in a clinic."

"Hmph."

"Can Zuko generate lightning as well?" Dr. Low continued.

"No," said Azula. "But he says he can redirect it. It's weird… I think he learned it from Uncle Fatso. He did it on me once."
"Do you mean General Iroh?"

"Yeah. Him." Azula grumbled.

"Did your uncle ever try to teach you the technique?"

"No."

"Hm. Why not?"

Azula shrugged a shoulder. "Don't know. Probably because he played favorites. He doted all over Zuko when we were younger and he even left with him on his journey to capture the Avatar. If I'd been the one banished, I'm positive he wouldn't have done the same for me. But I don't care. I don't need him anyway."

"Hm." Dr. Low leaned back. "Well, all right. How about childhood friends? Did you have any when you were living in the palace?"

"Yeah. I was friends with two girls from school, Mai and Ty-Lee." Azula crossed her arms. "But I guess we're enemies now."

"Why?"

"Because they betrayed me."

Dr. Low frowned. "When was this?"

"It was a few weeks before the Comet."

"How long had you been friends before?"

"Since we were six."

Dr. Low lifted an eyebrow. "Then you three must have been close."

Azula shrugged. "I guess. Only Mai and Ty-Lee were closer with each other than they were with me."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because they both stabbed me in the back at the same time and decided to break off from me together!"

Seeing her sudden fury, Dr. Low seemed to decide not to press the issue. "I see," he said. "Well, tell me a bit more about them, then. What were they like in general?"

Azula slumped back in her chair and sighed. "Well, Mai was the quiet girl. She was smart, but she didn't like to flaunt it, which I thought was weird because she was essentially crippling herself in society. But I could tell she was a good person. She didn't say stupid things and she didn't act like she was expecting someone to entertain her all the time. And she could throw daggers really well. It's like she always had her own thing and didn't care what anyone thought of her. She excelled because she knew she had it in her. And that was all that mattered." She paused to look at Dr. Low, who nodded for her to continue.

Azula looked askance again. "Ty-Lee was basically the opposite. She was in a matched set with her twin sisters for the first few weeks of school. They were all cliquey and outgoing, and so long as Ty-
Lee stayed with them, she practically had approval handed to her on a silver platter. But she couldn't stand it. She wanted to be different. And she was, a little. She could do acrobatic moves really well and wanted to learn how to fight. I taught her a bit of what I knew, and in return she taught me."

"So was the friendship an equal give-and-take between all three of you?"

Azula turned up her palms. "How should I know? I mean, it might have started that way at first. They came to my house and we'd play and stuff. We'd let each other borrow things. Sometimes they'd even invite me over, and we'd meet each other's families." She looked aside, then added, "Mai had a crush on Zuko, too."

Dr. Low lifted his eyebrows. "Did she?"

Azula nodded. "Yeah. It was cute. I caught on to it early on, but Zuko didn't, and Mai didn't think I knew. I'd tease her about it sometimes, but it was just for fun. It didn't hurt her or anything."

"Did Zuko ever find out?"

"Yeah. He was a dum-dum, of course, so it was only after I told him. He kept wondering why Mai would act so strange when he was around. And he told me he kind of liked her too. So I decided to put them both out of their misery one day and got them talking to each other." Azula felt a smile trace up her mouth, but then it paused halfway and she sighed. "Well, then he got banished. Ty-Lee went to join the circus. Mai's family moved to Omashu because my dad made her dad governor. And I started following Dad around meetings and getting a bigger role in the palace. Then one day he gave me a mission to bring Zuko and Iroh back to the Fire Nation. I decided to get Mai and Ty-Lee to go with me, because I realized I'd be able to do it faster with their help."

Dr. Low frowned. "Why did your father want Zuko and Iroh to return?"

"I don't know. All he said was that Zuko was a failure and Iroh was a traitor. I just assumed he wanted to throw them in prison. What else could he have wanted?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Dr. Low. "Did you ever think to question him about it?"

Azula shook her head. "No, of course not. It was his word, so whatever reason he had for it, it would still have to happen no matter what. I figured I'd just wait and see for myself."

Dr. Low nodded. "So you traveled with Mai and Ty-Lee on a mission to find Zuko and Iroh. How did things go between you three on the road?"

"They went fine, I guess. At first. We did everything as a team together, and they even helped me think of strategies of how to get a hold of Zuko. Then after we spotted the Avatar, Mai even pointed out that maybe we should focus on him more, since Zuko would still be trying to follow him. I doubted it at first, because by then Zuko knew that Dad wasn't really expecting him to come back with the Avatar, but Mai said she had a feeling that Zuko would still keep trying. And she turned out to be right. Then Ty-Lee helped when we pulled the coup on the Earth King by coming up with our Kyoshi Warrior disguises and learning to copy their fighting style. She said it was almost like being back in school plays again. And that made it almost kind of fun." Azula looked off at the wall. "I assumed they liked traveling with me. But apparently they didn't. So even if they wanted to be friends now, I wouldn't want to be theirs."

"But do you still enjoy reflecting on your journey together?" said Dr. Low.

Azula gave another shrug. "It's good to have good things to think back on, even if they'll never happen again." Her eyes traced the painted pattern of flowers and grass that adorned her teacup.
"Well, you shouldn't have an overly-negative outlook on the future, either," said Dr. Low. "Out of the two, it's the only one that's in our hands."

They were silent for a moment, eating their respective breakfasts. Azula gradually ate the rest of the cookies and finished her tea, then looked up at the doctor anew and frowned. "So if you and everyone else came here with me from the Fire Nation, where do you all usually work?"

"I have a clinic in the upper city," said Dr. Low. "Nira, Mira, Kira, Dee, and Isla were on staff there too. Then, when we got the assignment to take care of you, I had the nurses call some of their friends who worked in other places who were up for the job."

"And you did mind therapy there too?"

"No, just physical medicine." Dr. Low sipped some of his tea. "It was a combination of an urgent walk-in clinic and a regular hospital. I did surgeries, wound healing, fracture healing... the same things I did in the army, in other words. But I had other doctors on staff too, like Dee, and she specialized in physical therapy. The others are running things now, while I'm on leave."

"Hmh." Azula leaned her cheek on her fist. "Then where did you do mind healing?"

Dr. Low smiled. "That same place. Though I didn't advertise it. That would've gotten us inspected... and perhaps not that well respected. Mind healing has a connotation for being muddled and shady, but that's simply because the individual experience is hard to generalize, and the process of helping a person through difficult times isn't something you can mechanize like a surgery. So you have every practitioner basically doing it in his or her own way, which makes it hard to unify them and say they have something in common. I understand why the Imperial Academy hasn't recognized it as an official field. I do believe that there is a right and wrong way to go about it, but that's a story for another time. Let it suffice to say that I consider it as a concrete, rather than mystical practice, and I have channels through which I spread word of myself to other people who look at it in the same manner. So, whenever a patient wanted to see me for that specific purpose, they simply came to me and told me."

"Oh."

They sat for a few more moments in silence, then Dr. Low opened his notebook again. "Now if you don't mind, I just want you to fill me in on the general details of your journey. First you got the assignment from your father to capture Iroh and Zuko. Then you gathered Mai and Ty-Lee and set off to find them. How did you end up encountering the Avatar?"

Azula thought back. "It was in Omashu. He was with his friends from the Water Tribe. After I saw his arrow, I knew it was him. And I decided that we would try to take him along with Zuko."

"Why?"

"Well, Dad did want the Avatar. So why not kill two birds with one stone?"

Dr. Low nodded. "And then?"

Azula narrated the main points of her journey, from drilling through the wall of Ba Sing Se, to chasing the Avatar's bison, to spying on the Earth King, then bringing Zuko home. Finally, she got all the way up to entering the Boiling Rock.

"That was when they betrayed me," Azula said. "Zuko and his stupid new friends were trying to escape to the edge of the volcano and Mai just stopped the guards from cutting the line!"
"Wait a minute." Dr. Low held up a hand. "One thing at a time. Why were you so certain that Zuko would be in the prison?"

"Because Mai's uncle is the warden. He told her, and she told me."

"And did your father order you to go after Zuko, or did you decide to go there on your own?"

"I did it on my own."

"Why? Did you want to bring Zuko back to the palace?"

Azula scoffed. "No. I would've captured the Avatar and left him there. Or maybe put him in Capital City Prison so he'd be easier to watch over."

"Dad wouldn't have wanted to see him anyway."

"Why not?"

Azula shrugged. "Zuko's a traitor."

"Why?"

Azula did not respond. Dr. Low tapped the table with his finger. "I'm not as disconnected from palace life as you might think. I remember perfectly well how Zuko came home weeks before the Day of Black Sun. He was welcomed as a hero, along with you. Correct me if I'm wrong, but heroes aren't suddenly deemed traitors for no reason." He fixed his gaze on Azula and frowned. "Something happened between Zuko and your father."

"Obviously," Azula murmured.

"What was it?"

Azula looked down, silent for a moment in thought. "I don't know. Zuko probably got scared and blabbed about me being the one who killed the Avatar. Then, of course, the fact that the Avatar never died in the first place probably didn't work to his advantage. But still, it wouldn't have made Dad mad at him..."

"When did you notice your father was angry?"

"A little while after the eclipse. That's why I think Zuko talked to him sometime then. He had his own bunker, and he knew where Dad was, so he could've easily gotten to him. And with everyone's firebending gone, Zuko probably thought it would be the perfect way of making Dad listen to him. Finally being on equal footing." She rolled her eyes. "But I guess it worked."

"What happened after the eclipse?"

"I left the bunker once the invasion forces started to retreat and helped with the counterattack. Our army captured some prisoners and Dad coordinated all the reinforcements to secure the city. Once the city was clear, I went back to the palace. That was when I noticed Zuko was gone. I asked Dad about it, and he said that it should be of no concern to me, and if I ever brought him here again he'd banish me along with him." Azula gave a sour frown. "That's how mad he was. And you know, he might have even done it. He might've banished me right then and there, if I hadn't gotten away from him before he could."

"So you were afraid he'd follow through with it?"
"Back then, no," Azula said. "But now that I think about it, he probably would have. He could've done it at any point in my life, as soon as I stopped being his perfect little servant." She looked away at the wall in spite.

But Dr. Low's gaze on her was steady. "When a person is angry, they can often do or say things that they don't mean."

Azula looked up darkly. "That's an understatement."

"Nevertheless, it applies. Even to your father."

Azula shook her head. "You're wrong. He always means what he does. He meant it when he banished Zuko the first time and he meant it when he said he'd banish me, and that means I was nothing but a tool for him the whole time!"

"But that would imply that he meant it when he gave you his favor, that he meant it when he took Zuko back, and that all of his contrary reactions were spontaneous and genuine, rather than planned and calculated."

Azula started to retort, but found that she couldn't think of a counterargument. She settled back with a scowl.

Dr. Low inclined his head. "It also means that it applies to other people as well, and that you have to stop searching for a single motive behind the sum of a person's actions throughout their lifetime. You cannot keep thinking that everyone has a secret agenda, against you or otherwise. That includes your friends. People are not one-dimensional caricatures, so it is fruitless to try to outwit them by behaving like one."

Azula let out a breath. "Then why don't you tell me what I should have done, if you're so smart?"

"You should have stopped to think, the moment your friend helped Zuko, why she had done it."

"I did! I asked her why!"

"And what did she say?"

"She said: 'You miscalculated. I love Zuko more than I fear you.'"

Dr. Low turned out his palm. "Then there's your answer. She chose Zuko despite any consequences she'd face for saving him, because she loves him. Love is a natural emotion, one without which life would be inconceivable. She also said that you miscalculated. That means, up to that point, you had been trying got make your friends obey you by using a set of static, predetermined methods, like intimidation or flaunting. Do you deny that?"

Azula grumbled. "No."

"So you recognize on some level that you were doing it. Now, you must recognize why it failed. No matter how well you manipulate your friends' fears or emotions, at some point the rules that you think govern their behavior will simply not be accurate anymore. That is because people change. As they progress through their lives, they find new desires and new loves, which cause them to reinterpret their attitudes and beliefs. While your friends may very well have feared you at one point, something they encountered on their journey with you made them reconsider that fear, or perhaps place something else above it."

"In your first friend's case, it was love. You, however, failed to see this, and continued trying to
cultivate that fear in her, when in all likelihood it was already gone. The Boiling Rock was simply the breaking point of her patience with you, when she decided that she could no longer keep serving you with a clear conscience. Your hold broke on her, not because of some strategic error on your part, but because you were never the one controlling her in the first place and she realized that before you did. Your friends are not battle ships to be steered, and neither are you."

Azula met this with fuming silence, and Dr. Low flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. "Now let's talk about your other friend. How did she betray you?"

"She chi-blocked me as I was about to attack Mai."

"And that surprises you?"

"It infuriates me!"

Dr. Low raised an eyebrow. "A friend stopping two other friends from fighting infuriates you?"

"Mai would have gotten what she deserved! Ty-Lee chose her over me!"

"No, Azula, she chose both of you," said Dr. Low. "She knew that you, the master firebender, could cause a great deal of damage in a fit of rage, so she simply prevented you from doing something that would have spun the situation out of control. The same way, if I may add, that Zuko likely took advantage of the eclipse to avoid a firebending battle with Ozai. He knew that Ozai would react violently to whatever it was he wanted to tell him, so he did the sensible thing and delayed that reaction. From what you've just told me, you understand the same thing about your father, and employed the same tactics by distancing yourself from him when you sensed him to be angered. What Ty-Lee did was essentially the same, though she of course had no other way to stop you than to attack you."

Dr. Low crossed his arms. "Now imagine, for a moment, that you had fought Mai and that you won. What would that have proven? Would it have made her agree with you? Not likely. Would it have scared Ty-Lee into silence? Possibly. But intimidation can only work for so long, even if it has genuine power backing it up. Eventually, Ty-Lee would have drifted away from you in the same way, and you would have still ended up losing them both."

By now, Azula's mouth was trembling. "You don't get it!" she blurted. "I'm the princess! I'm not some stupid child in a playground; I live in the real world, and in the real world, your perfect morals get trampled into the dirt! People aren't good - they're liars! They're only on your side for as long as you have something to offer them or can scare them into following you. Otherwise they'd strike you down the minute they get a chance! The only people you can call your family and friends are people who are loyal to you no matter what. If they're not loyal, then they're nothing! And you're nothing, too!"

Dr. Low gave a nod. "You're absolutely right. But you seem to be mistaken about what loyalty means. Loyalty to your friends isn't burning them, nor is it lying to them or manipulating them. I understand that you grew up during a war and I'm not trying to say that the ethics of wartime are the same as the ethics of peace. I was on the front myself, and I can personally attest that there was no way we could have survived if we had bound ourselves to all the typical societal virtues, like cordiality and understanding. There's no room for asking a fallen man if he's all right when his friends are bombarding you with boulders. And if a commander has war prisoners to trade, you can bet he'll want a fellow commander back and not a plain soldier, even though both of them are human beings and their lives are equally valuable. Equality, loyalty, and friendship are bound by that set of universal laws of decency which unfortunately during war are often bent. But that doesn't mean that there isn't a right and wrong situation to bend them, much less does it mean that you should strive to
apply that practice to normal life."

Azula listened to him sourly with her eyes narrowed.

Dr. Low took another sip of his tea. "Now... most of those policies about survival and strategy that you're familiar with aren't actually that old. Much of the way in which the Fire Nation military and the nobles think today was introduced to us during the first decade or so after Azulon ascended to the throne. You can imagine he inherited a pretty difficult situation from his father - without Sozin's claim of divine inspiration and without the comet, the only way he could sustain the burden of the war was through sheer military prowess. So Azulon had to cultivate the power of his forces and eliminate all potential threats, no matter how small they may have seemed, like the Southern Water Tribe.

"In addition to that, he had to ensure that each and every soldier was unquestionably loyal to his country, whether they had the comet on their side or not. That meant enforcing strict conduct codes as well as punishing those who disobeyed them. If just one person messed up or betrayed secrets to the enemy, entire battles could be lost. You, Azula, have been brought up in an environment where this conflict came first, and what more, by a father who was no less than the commander of all the Fire Nation's forces. I have no doubt that Ozai understood Azulon's war ethic and the reasons behind it. But he also, whether consciously or not, carried its black-and-white values over to his family - victory or loss, friend or foe, strength or weakness. And that is evident from one very significant event in your life."

Azula frowned. "What event?"

"The banishment of your brother."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "How was that significant for me?"

Dr. Low lifted an eyebrow. "You watched the Agni Kai, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And it didn't affect you at all? Not the slightest bit?"

"No."

Dr. Low gave a faint smile. "I find that hard to believe."

Feeling a sudden rage, Azula slapped the table. "It didn't affect me! It didn't, so stop trying to analyze it out of me! It wasn't my fault that Zuko was too full of himself to stay out of that stupid meeting, which by the way Dad didn't even let me watch in on, but I guess he was just jealous of me like he always was and saw it as a chance to get the upper hand on me or something. Then of course, he got exactly what was coming to him after he talked back to that general! It was Zuko's fault!"

"So if you were Ozai, you would have done the exact same thing?"

"Yes!"

"Burned Zuko and banished him?"

"Yes!" Azula crossed her arms. But right then, the lady with the cherry bowl came back into her mind, kneeling and pathetically proffering the fruit into the air. Azula let a moment of silence pass, then rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe I wouldn't banish him. I'd teach him his lesson then give him something useful to do, like manage some metal factory or work for the general he insulted. I mean,
we already have a war going on, so why waste your time banishing people when you need every person you can get? I wouldn't have made that big a deal over some brat boy piping up at a war meeting, because that would have made me look bad too, like I had nothing better to think about besides family dramas. And the nobles would all start gossiping about me, when they should be being organized and productive."

She glanced at Dr. Low. "Because honestly, after Dad sent Zuko away, the whole palace started talking. People acted like a bomb went off. Some of them didn't like Zuko from the beginning, so they sort of got what they wanted, but even they started getting all quiet and low-key, as if they could be next. I think Dad should've disciplined Zuko even more after that, but instead he took the easy way out and sent him off on his own. So for three years, Zuko used Fire Nation ports, lived off of Fire Nation supplies, and got in the way of people who could do things way more effectively. The least I would have done is give Zuko better resources, so that if by some miraculous chance he found the Avatar, he'd be able to contain him. But Dad's stupid."

Dr. Low gave a chuckle. "Zuko's stupid, Dad's stupid?"

"Everyone's stupid!" Azula spread her arms out at her sides. "I'm the sane one around here!"

"Well, I never said it was unacceptable to have an opinion about things." Dr. Low leafed over the notes he had made, then glanced at the clock. "All right, I think that's enough for today. How about you go to physical therapy now, have lunch, then two hours for a break."

"Sure, whatever."

Dr. Low got up, unlocked an upper storage cabinet, and placed the notebook inside. He turned to Nira, who had turned up in the doorway moments before. "I'll keep this in here, all right?"

Nira nodded. "All righty!"

Dr. Low went off to the door and gave Azula a parting nod. "I'll come back in a couple of days and we'll pick up from the Boiling Rock."

Azula followed him with her gaze. "Are you sure you don't want to dissect my brain next?" she called out. "Or screen me for some mental parasite? Or ask me why I decided to hold my cup a certain way to trace its roots back to my childhood?"

A smile spread across Dr. Low's face. "Believe me, with enough time and logic, that last one is possible." He lifted a finger matter-of-factly and left the room.

Azula crossed her arms. In the meantime, Nira approached and began to clear the table. Azula leaned her elbows over the surface and peered down at her emptied teacup in thought. "I don't understand," she muttered. "He asks me to tell him about my experiences, but he ends up telling me more than I tell him. If he already knows so much about what I'm supposed to do, then why does he bother asking what I think?"

"Dr. Low wants to find out what's important to you," Nira responded. "He asks you to give details about your experiences because he wants you to notice certain things about them. I mean, it wouldn't really help you if he just read off a diagnosis and told you what to to think, right?" She took the handlebars of the wheelchair and steered Azula out of the room, entering the hallway.

"Still, it's like he takes every little thing from my life and twists it into some sort of lesson!" Azula said.

"Well, that's the point of therapy. It gets you to think about your past in a different way, so that you
can approach your future more constructively."

Azula whirled her head around to face the nurse. "But how was I supposed to know all of that? Everything he said about Mai and Ty-Lee, and why they did what they did? I can't possibly sit down and analyze every minute of my life like that! There just wouldn't be time! And even if I could, what use would it be if in the meantime I'm supposed to be devising a plan for hunting the Avatar or drilling into Ba Sing Se? Is he saying I should have that in mind too, along with my regular plans? It's physically impossible to hold all that stuff in my head!" Azula smacked the side of her head for emphasis.

Nira smiled. "You don't have to hold everything in your head. The point is to let everything come naturally!"

"But what does that mean?"

Nira sighed. "Look, overthinking things isn't going to help either. The session's over, so it's over. Now focus on physical therapy. It'll give your mind a break."

Azula grumbled. Nira wheeled her into Dee's room, where the therapist was sitting behind her desk as always, this time with Isla occupying the nearby chair.

"Hello!" said Nira. "Right on time, I hope."

"Yes, right on time..." said Dee, rising from her chair. Nira pushed Azula's wheelchair farther forward, then left the room. At the same time, Isla rose to her feet, taking a cup of tea she had been drinking.

"Thank you for the recipe," she said to Dee. "I don't think I would have ever really thought to use valerian and saffron together like that."

Dee smiled. "It's not really mine, technically - my aunt copied a few from a tea master's recipe book. I should write to her to ask her if she can hunt them down."

"Mm."

"Then maybe in return you can give me something for insomnia. Maybe it was the long hours, but the past year doing shift work was horrible!"

Isla smiled. "I haven't had a need for that yet, personally, but I'll think of something."

Dee returned the gesture and nodded. "All right, then."

Isla left the room, then Dee began to unclasp Azula's straps with a sigh. "Shame how you can work in the same place as somebody for years and only get to know them after being stuck in a single building with them for over a month..."

Azula gazed at the therapist in curiosity, not saying anything. But Dee quickly phased into her usual rhythm of work, and the next hour passed by in the same businesslike pace. By the time the therapy session ended, Azula was back to the same worked-out, mentally-numbed state as usual. Moments later, Isla came back to take Azula out. She helped her into the wheelchair, locking some of the straps, and drove her through the hallway.

"I'm supposed to get a two-hour break," Azula said.

"I know." Isla rolled her through the doorway and stopped her in the center of the room. She
unlocked an upper cabinet and took out a bottle of serum, then spilled out the last spoonful that remained. She gave the spoon to Azula, waited for her to take it, then closed the cabinets again and locked them.

"So what am I supposed to do now?" Azula asked.

"Whatever you like. You can have a nap if you're tired. Or read something. Kira put some more books into the shelves." Isla leaned down and began to undo Azula's clasp locks, pulling the straps away.

Azula didn't move, but looked at the nurse warily.

"I assume you want to move around," Isla said. "But I have to lock the wing. If you need anything, the three of them are in the lounge." She gave a slight turn of the head in the direction of the hallway.

"What's everyone else doing?" Azula asked.

"Dee's writing a research paper. She was working on it back in Capital City. The other nurses are having lunch. I'm making medicine." She said all of this in a flat tone. Azula had no way of telling if she had stressed the last sentence or not.

She began to study the nurse's face, trying to gauge what kind of emotion was lurking beneath it. But Isla looked back without any particular color to her expression. In fact, there wasn't much color to her at all. Her eyes, which Azula had just come to notice, were slate gray. And despite the full daytime, she still looked tired.

Isla held her gaze for a few moments, then finally rose to her feet and backed away towards the door. "Be sure to rest up," she said. With a final nod, she left, and moments later, Azula heard a click as the dividing door was locked. In the silence, she became aware of the faint sounds of chatter and laughter coming from the lounge. After a moment, Azula walked up to the bedroom door and closed it.

Turning around, she spanned her gaze across the empty bedroom, which was clean and bright with daylight. Outside, waves crashed quietly against the distant shore. Unexpectedly, a sense of relaxation began to spread through her, and Azula climbed up into the bed, taking some of the old newspaper scrolls that Dr. Low had brought. She started to skim over them, then moments later, there came another knock on her door. Azula looked up, seeing the door open ever so slightly and Isla poke her head inside. She was carrying a tray.

"I almost forgot your lunch. Here..." She walked up to Azula and proffered the tray with both hands. It was a colorful salad with chunks of meat, a small bowl of fruit on the side.

Azula took the tray and set it into her lap. "Thanks."

Isla nodded in response, her brief smile just for a moment overriding the strange, uncertain way the word had felt after slipping out. Then the nurse left, closing the door quietly, and in the resulting solitude, the cloud of puzzlement that had briefly settled over Azula's mind began to fade. In its wake, it left a strange stillness.

Azula's gaze drifted back to the scrolls she had been reading, which had that portrait of Zuko standing before the crowd, the eleven-year-old Avatar boy at his side.

Strange, how Zuko had managed to gain his friendship after effectively being his enemy. It just went to show that some people by their nature belonged together... stuck together like magnets, a gob of goodness and righteousness. But from what Azula could remember, her bond with Mai and Ty-Lee
had formed the same way. So what had changed? Them or her? And why?

Azula tried to think it over, but when she was unable to get a result, she stopped. She looked back down at her tray of food.

Maybe it wasn't even goodness that had bound the Avatar's team, but goals. The Avatar had wanted to stop her father. Zuko had wanted to stop him too. And an alliance had forged a friendship. In her case, goals had ruined it. Her goal of capturing the Avatar hadn't been Mai's and Ty-Lee's. They had stuck with her just... because. And she had mistakenly begun to treat them as if they would pursue her goal as relentlessly as she was. Then, of course, when the time came to put that goal over something else they cared about, they had chosen the latter.

She imagined Zuko in the palace now, surrounded by all of them, ruling together in happiness and harmony. He could have it, she decided. Whatever he and his friends thought about her, whatever conclusions the nurses or Dr. Low would come to draw from her revelations, from now on she would focus only on herself. Her mind, as abnormal and inadequate as it was, was a realm that was completely her own. And there, at least, she could be free.

Azula set the food aside, and after some thought, closed the blinds and got back into bed.
Storms were common in the summer. Zuko always saw them developing through the large palace windows, in the occasional moments of pause he’d allow himself throughout the day. The morning would start off clear and sunny, then in the afternoon, a mass of gray clouds would collect together over the horizon. Then the sun would recede, the sky would darken, and finally a sheet of rain would drop over the gardens. The storm would last for about an hour, turning everything outside white and gray, the rushing and pattering of the rain whispering out from the silent rooms. Then as easily as it had come, it would fade, leaving only a grayish sheen in the sky and some faint rumbles of thunder in the distance.

He had taken to his new duties as Fire Lord without much worry. There had simply been too much to do during the first weeks after Sozin’s Comet to leave time for questioning himself. And by the time he had fallen into something like a new rhythm of life, it had begun to seem second nature, and all the thoughts and concerns that had drifted through his mind gradually sorted themselves into orders of importance. Ending a hundred-year war, after all, took more than a final battle. He had to tie up loose ends, assess the armies’ standings, and get the nobles on the mainland to cooperate with the change of policy. Those who didn’t had to be detained.

He had ordered the interrogations to begin on the second week of his official reign, once the remaining generals had returned from the battlefield. At the beginning, he had rounded up a small group of people he knew he could trust – guards, police officers, servants. Then he gradually worked his way out, covering all the spheres of palace hierarchy. Every single noble had been questioned for their loyalty to Ozai, and depending on how it went, was either put into prison, or given the opportunity to pledge themselves to him.

Not all of them had. So Zuko had simply laid them off, letting them rebuild their lives somewhere else, and they never bothered him again. New people came in to take their place, and soon enough, Zuko had a new command of subjects – Captain Lang, Warden Poon, Doctor Low… and countless other faces that had been taken from his old life and rearranged into a new mosaic. It was only in those moments when Zuko slowed his pace, detaching his mind for a minute from the constellation of tasks that hung over him, that he realized how much everything had changed.

He was now the sole constant occupant of an enormous palace. He could go wherever he wanted, do whatever he wanted, and repurpose any aspect of his surroundings to his liking. He could spend an entire day lounging atop the war conference table eating fruit if he so pleased. The shadows in the pillared throne room that had seemed to dance and leer over him as a child were no longer frightening. The dozens of tall, looming paintings of Fire Lords in the portrait hall could all be dwarfed by a mural of Savior Zuko’s ten-thousand feats on the opposite wall. He had chased away the ghosts, shooed away the storms, and now was free to fill the place with his identity.

Sticking to the tradition, Zuko had ordered his bedroom to be cleared out after the coronation and all his things to be moved to the Fire Lord’s chambers. The move had been a short one, for the chambers were located in the same wing of the palace, but nevertheless the difference was staggering. When the servants had opened the doors to the chambers for him for the first time, and Zuko had been greeted by a vast, sprawling space, with a floor of dark wood, red and gold carpets, and windows that reached up to the arching ceiling, he had stood still for a moment in awe.

His servants had cleared away most of Ozai’s possessions, but even so, it was clear that the rooms’ previous resident had liked to live in plenty. Swords and masks hung from the walls of the front rooms, and the shelves in the study were stuffed with books and scrolls. There were two writing
desks, one in the study and a smaller one in the bedchamber, both stocked with parchment, brushes, and ink stones of various sizes.

Of the entire collection, there was only one thing that mystified him – a large painting that hung on the wall directly across from the bed, depicting a vast, sloping terrain, with large rocks cropping up along a dirt path. The picture was hazy and simplistic, most of the landscape obscured by a white mist. Zuko had no way of knowing if his father had put it there, but at any rate, Ozai had kept it.

He had begun his life there in an unceremonious way, using only the spaces he needed, letting his father's possessions gradually get pushed back into the distant corners. He found it easy not to dwell on the fact that he was living where his father once lived, and indeed where all the previous Fire Lords had lived, perhaps the one place in the palace that had intrigued him most. How often his younger self had dreamed about those rooms in wonder, imagined what they looked like, been filled with frustration at never being let inside. Now, they were his – but most importantly, Zuko decided, they were his for a reason. They symbolized the job he had taken up, the job he was resolved to do. Whoever the rooms previous occupants were, whatever they had done or wanted, was a matter of the past. Now was the time for the future. And the future was up to him.

So he had thought, for a time. But as the weeks wore on, and the tasks and events and meetings gradually piled up and started to clash with each other, all of those tiny worries slowly began to catch up to him.

It had started with a weekly council meeting. Zuko had gathered in the throne room with some generals that had recently returned from the Earth Kingdom to discuss the fate of the Fire Nation's colonies. Reports were already widespread that the Earth King had disappeared, which left the enormous country effectively without a leader. Coupled up with the uncovering of the Dai Li conspiracy, the Ba Sing Se palace had descended into chaos. Cities and provinces were beginning to fend for themselves, would-be leaders rising up to assume control of their own territories and declaring autonomy from the rest.

In light of the circumstances, one of Zuko's generals had advised him to tighten his hold on the colonies, lest they too get out of hand or fall to invasion. Still another had suggested that they give them their autonomy, as a symbol of goodwill on the part of the Fire Nation and an affirmation of its policy of peace. No one had dared to say it, but this was to be Zuko's first test. His decision would reveal to the world, and to his people, what kind of ruler he was going to be.

Throughout the meeting, Zuko had sat at the head of the conference table, gaze flickering from one face to another as he listened to the generals' exchange. First one speech would seem convincing to him, then another, then still a third, and then the first general would counter the other two and insist on his own viewpoint. It was only an hour in, when the generals finally fell silent and looked to him, that Zuko realized he hadn't said a single word. Feeling the silence of the room press down upon him, he cleared his throat.

"My lord, what is your opinion on the matter?" General Mak had asked.

The generals were silent as they waited for Zuko to answer. When Zuko didn't speak, one of them rose to his feet. "It is clear that His Majesty wishes to think over our suggestions some more before making up his mind. Perhaps it would be best if we met again on another day?"

Zuko nodded. "That would be best."

One by one, the generals all bowed to him and filed out. General Mak had lingered behind however, and once the others had left, he approached Zuko. "Your Majesty, if I may."
"Yes?"

"Indecision will not get us anywhere. The longer we delay, the more we will give off the impression of weak will, which will only make things more difficult in the long run."

Zuko had been too perplexed to reply. The general bowed and took his leave. Only when Zuko was alone again with his thoughts did he realize the meaning of his words, and felt his face flush with shame. Granted, Mak was one of the more critical generals in his command and seemed to have a bleak outlook on things, but this time his words rang particularly true. Why was it taking him so long to decide? Was it really a weakness?

Zuko had returned to his chambers that evening lost in thought.

*Weak. Slow. Pathetic.*

He lumbered over to the writing desk beside his bed and sat down. He looked at another, smaller table behind him and saw a tray with a teapot and an empty cup. He stared dumbly at the tea set for a moment, as if it were an apparition. He could almost hear his father's laugh echo in the silence.

*Tea and failure!*

Zuko clenched his fist. He got up and went to the tea set, holding his hand up to the teapot. It was hot. He went to the bell-pull on the wall and tugged it, and moments later, a servant entered the room.

"Fire Lord Zuko! Is there a problem?"

Zuko pointed at the tea set. "Who left that here?"

The servant bowed. "I did, my lord. I've been doing it for the past few days, ever since Your Majesty told me that he preferred to have tea before bed. I used to put it in the front room, but after seeing it untouched I thought that Your Majesty failed to see it, so I decided to put it in another room this time. Forgive me if I have caused offense."

After a moment, Zuko shook his head. "No, it's not a problem. You've done fine. Thank you."

The servant bowed and left.

Zuko went back to the desk and sat down. He poured himself some tea and pondered while he drank it. The more time he spent as Fire Lord, the more ruling was starting to feel like being attacked by an onslaught of hornets. Leading a country wasn't a sole duty, he realized; it was in fact a delicate game of power balancing and compromising. Every day, he had ministers and generals talking to him, requesting his attention, asking if His Majesty would be so kind as to hear their solution for the problem of something-or-other or if His Majesty had an opinion on an idea presented by someone else three days ago.

Even when he had been a Fire Prince and still had enough of his father's favor to be able to observe the decision-making process, it had always seemed like the Fire Lord was the only person in charge. The ministers had been present, of course, but it had always seemed like Ozai had played them, pitted them against each other while implementing solutions on his own. Then, when his father's plans had gotten more dangerous, Zuko had started to wonder how much of an opinion the counsellors really had and whether Ozai was just using them as puppets to do what he wanted. It was from the image of such a ruler that Zuko had turned away, vowing never to be like his father, to be something better. But now, Zuko had to admit to himself that his father had made the job look easy.
After finishing his tea, then spending the next hour switching between reading a book and writing a journal entry, Zuko finally gave up trying to occupy himself and went to sleep. Once he had extinguished all the lamps and surrendered himself to the quiet darkness, Zuko was washed over with a morbid feeling. Here he was, in the rooms that had belonged to his father, that had belonged to his father's father, his father's father's father, and countless other fathers that had come before that. He was their rightful owner, and yet he still felt like a child, who had decided to sneak into his dad's study one day and snoop through his papers. The fact that he had an entire country on his shoulders now was almost too absurd to think about. How could he think about a country, when he could hardly keep his own court in order? As the general had said, he was weak.

Zuko had lain still for several hours on his back without sleeping, just staring at the ceiling and thinking about his dilemma. The memories of his first few days on the throne now seemed both incredible and unreal – how had been so sure of himself, so determined to right Ozai's wrongs. But now, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that there was still a part of him deep down that held to the same irrational imagining he had had as a child, that of his father as some all-powerful, otherworldly figure, who always knew what to do and had the final say as to what was right and wrong. It still seemed like at any moment, in the clear light of day, Ozai could come walking into the room, his steely gaze boring into Zuko's own, and say: "Boy, what have you done?"

Actually, there were few times when his father hadn't seemed angry. It seemed to be Ozai's natural state of being, just like sneakiness was Azula's and kindness was his mother's. And more often than not, Ozai's anger was directed at Zuko. Why didn't he understand the basic firebending forms? He went where when he was supposed to be preparing for his lessons? And each time, those narrowed, amber eyes would bore into Zuko's own, and draw from him a hundred pleas for forgiveness. That was why, in the moments when his father was happy, it would seem like the sun had broken through the dark clouds and illuminated everything. The whole world seemed brighter.

But as Zuko had grown older, those moments for some reason became rarer, and even when they came, they masked a dangerous shiftiness. After his mother had gone, Zuko had, for a moment, fallen into complete despair. He had been stuck with his father now, and he wasn't sure if he liked it. Zuko busied himself with these thoughts so much that he hardly got any sleep, and so the next day he dragged himself through the palace like a zombie. Retreating to his father's room with his father's mocking laugh in his mind was only making it worse, and for a while Zuko could only sit and despair at the prospect of another sleepless night. But then, suddenly, an idea occurred to him. Of course he couldn't stop thinking about his father – he was sleeping in the man's chambers! So that night, Zuko gathered up some of his things, made sure the servants didn't see him, and snuck into his old bedroom. He made the brief trek through the family wing, found the door at the end of the hallway, and unlocked it.

The bedroom was practically untouched since the day he had left it on the Day of Black Sun. Servants had come to clean it up, but all the old furniture was still there, the bed made and orderly. Zuko threw back the covers and lay down, already starting to feel more like himself.

He lowered his head onto the pillow, pulled the blanket over his shoulder, and closed his eyes.

*There*, he told himself. *Sleep.*
"Ah!"

Zuko's eyes flew open. The sound of Azula's laugh and the image of his mother falling into a dark void vanished from his mind and were replaced by the dark, quiet bedroom. Hardly two hours had passed. The faint moonlight was still streaming through the curtains, just as before.

Zuko sat up, waiting for his hammering heartbeat to subside. He had dreamed of the two dragons again, one red and one blue, encircling him on his throne. Only this time both of them had gone rogue on him and were about to pounce and devour him. He was reminded of the dreams he had had in Ba Sing Se, during the onslaught of that mysterious illness he had triggered when he had freed Appa from the Dai Li's prison. Thankfully his dreams had never been as hectic since, though some elements from them still recurred.

Particularly one.

"Zuko, help me!"

He saw Ursa reaching out to him again as she had done minutes ago, her face marked with fear, before the darkness swallowed her up. And once again, a reel of old memories marched into his mind… *Dad's going to kill you… Everything I've done I've done to protect you…* His father standing with his back to him, unresponsive… Where was Mom? *No one knows…* Yet a voice inside of him had been crying out. His father had done something to her. His father had gotten rid of her!

Zuko leaned back into the pillows, folding his hands over his stomach. He knew that wasn't true now. Ozai hadn't killed her. But Ursa had killed Azulon. Ozai had known about it, and afterwards had sent her away.

Ursa was alive.

Had been then, at any rate.

What had happened to her after she had left the palace, though, Zuko didn't know. He couldn't, not with so little resources. But there was no use in speculating. When the time came, Zuko resolved, he would start a search for her. Even if the effort proved fruitless, the fact that he had made an effort would give him some measure of peace. But that time wasn't now.

Zuko blinked, letting his gaze pan across the darkness. The bed was positioned right in front of the door, where if he opened it, he would see the old hallway of the family wing, with the tall windows and long white curtains. Dimly he realized that this was right where she had woken him up all those years ago, before she had turned to leave and vanished.

He stared at the door in the darkness, pondering her shadowy figure in his mind while his gaze was fixed on the barely-visible patterns in the wood. And right then, he felt a subtle, almost reactional stir of fear inside him. It was as if a ghostly hand had brushed over his neck. Zuko shuddered, his gaze darting to the bed canopy, to the ceiling, to the empty shelves and drawers that stood on the sterile floor like skeletons, and for some reason he got the acute feeling that he had wandered into the lair of some beast.

And the beast was watching him.

Zuko's heart accelerated. In a jolt, he sprang out of the bed, gaze sweeping his surroundings,
clenched his fists in preparation to blast fire. He hung like this with bated breath, wandering around the room, then when he had assured himself that there was nobody else there, he pulled his cloak around him and left.

Zuko hurried down the hallway, trying to drown out the echo his footsteps made. He gave the tall white curtains a glance, then made a sharp turn to the main hallway that led back to the Fire Lord's chambers. He snuck past the servant's room and reentered his new bedroom, closing the door. He sank against it, catching his breath, allowing the silence to settle back in.

After a minute, Zuko approached the bed and climbed back into the covers. He spent a moment just lying there, staring out at the strange, misty painting on the wall.

"Your mother did vicious, treasonous things that night. She knew the consequences and accepted them. For her treason, she was banished."

"Where's Mom?" "No one knows. Oh, and last night, Grandpa passed away. "You're sick, Azula. And I want my knife back!"

"Who's going to make me? Mom?"

The seconds ticked by into minutes, and soon the panicked craze that had taken over him earlier began to seem silly. He couldn't keep running from bad memories like a child. Otherwise he really would stay one forever. But he couldn't let that happen; he had to move forward.

After that night, Zuko slept solely in his new bedchamber and forcefully pushed out all of his doubts to the contrary. If anything, new scenery would keep his mind fixed on current events, and that would help him function. The old memories would still probably haunt him for some time, but perhaps if he worked long enough and acclimatized himself to being the palace's owner, they would go away on their own.

Thus, three weeks passed.

The interrogations proceeded through the ranks of Zuko's government, resulting in some officials being kept, others let go, a few others arrested. Captain Lang uncovered a sizable band of dissenters, and though it was far from the first one, it seemed to be at least more organized than the rest. The captain had shown Zuko a letter that provided clues as to their next meeting and Zuko had instructed him to keep tabs on it.

And so on the morning of the third day of the tenth month, nearly two months after his coronation, Zuko emerged into the throne room ready for another day of work. He was exhausted, for he had spent most of the previous night reading some treatises that had been lying around in his study, but thanks to some early morning tea, his head was clear and sharp.

He took his seat on the throne, waiting for the first of the day's appointments to arrive. He was expecting several that day, in no particular order: the Kyoshi warriors, the police, some generals, and Captain Lang, who would be delivering a report about the progress of the week's investigations.

Zuko had the room to himself for a while before a two palace guards opened the golden doors and bowed. "Captain Lang is here to deliver his report, Your Majesty."

Zuko nodded. "You can let him in."

The guards disappeared through the doors, then they opened again for Captain Lang. The man strode
forward in his determined, predator-like walk, his arms swinging at his sides. He was holding a packet of ten scrolls tied together with a string. The captain approached the throne and bowed, and when the he lifted his head, Zuko noted with surprise that he had a black eye and several bruises on his face.

"Did your interrogations go all right, Captain?" Zuko asked.

Captain Lang lifted his hand and brushed his swollen nose. "Yes, my lord. Some of the detainees just got out of hand..." He sniffed and proffered the package. "I have the transcripts of all the interviews we've done this week. The dissenter band seems to be more organized than we thought. Three days ago we arrested a noble named Aren who tried to find out about their next meeting. He received a flyer from General Mak."

Zuko's eyebrows climbed. "General Mak?"

"Yes, my lord." Lang paused. "That would make it the sixth flyer we've found, adding in another one that Captain Sung sent over from South Chung-Ling. We're still not sure how Mak came to have this one. Maybe he confiscated it from someone and gave it to Aren thinking that Aren wanted to report it, or maybe he's connected to Tao Yu and wanted to lure Aren to the meeting."

Zuko locked his hands together and rested his chin on his knuckles. The last time he had seen General Mak had been at a council meeting the previous week. He hadn't spoken to the general personally that time, but Mak had delivered a report about the progress of the demilitarization plan and voiced his opinion on some related issues, as had the other generals. Everything had been as normal.

"Did you get to speak to Mak as well?" Zuko asked.

"No, my lord," Lang replied. "We entered his house the same evening we interrogated Aren, but there was no one home. Mak appears to have left the city."

This news hit Zuko like a punch in the stomach. "He's gone?"

"Yes, my lord."

Zuko leaned on the armrest, tapping a finger against his knee. "That's... strange. And he never took official leave from me either."

Lang nodded. "We're currently trying to track him down. We're interrogating people who know him and work with him. I'll get the transcripts to you later, but from what my officers are telling me so far, no one knows where he went. But we did search the other generals' offices again, and we haven't found any more flyers. All of them said that they didn't even know Mak had gone anywhere. So if he is connected, then it's likely he's operating alone here."

"Well, that's good to hear," said Zuko. "Could I see the transcripts?"

"Of course, my lord." Lang handed the package to a nearby servant and the servant handed the scrolls to Zuko.

As Zuko lowered the package into his lap, Captain Lang bowed his head a little and pursed his lips. "I also... transgressed from your instructions, my lord. Yesterday morning I went to interrogate Ozai."

Zuko's eyes widened. "You went to interrogate my father? Why?"
"I wanted to get an idea of how much he knew about what was going on. I knew it would've been a stretch to assume that he started the whole operation, but I wanted to see if perhaps he was counting on somebody to make a change for him." The captain reached up to wipe his nose again, then cast his gaze off to the side. "But it was no use. He doesn't know anything. He's in the dark as completely as can be."

Zuko looked down at the scrolls. "Do you have a transcript of the conversation?"

"Yes, my lord. It's the one with gold string."

Zuko opened the indicated scroll and looked over the lines of handwriting. He blinked in amazement, but there they were, his father's words. He read through several pages of what appeared to be a curt, toneless exchange, then stared for some time at the last line: *Variation*. After that, there was another scroll with the names of six generals, followed by Ozai's signature.

Zuko rubbed his temple. "I see what you mean. I think it's safe to consider him disassociated for now, but I'll let the guards know to keep a close eye on him. Thank you for taking the initiative."

Captain Lang inclined his head.

"In the meantime, keep working with Captain Sung. Try to see if there were any other cities that got the letters and use the carriers to trace the source. Maybe Mak is trying to make it to one of the other places where the group is stationed."

"Yes, my lord."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You may go."

The captain rose and bowed. Once he was gone, Zuko looked to the guards by the door. "You may bring in whoever's waiting."

The guards brought in the group of people waiting outside the throne room, and two Kyoshi Warriors walked in. It was Suki and Ty-Lee, looking quite identical with their face paint and green dresses. Mai followed behind in her customary dark-maroon robes, strands of her ink-black hair draped over her shoulders.

Suki walked up to the throne first and bowed. "Good morning, Fire Lord Zuko!"

The other two girls followed her gesture.

"And to you too," Zuko said. "How does everything look?"

"Well, my girls say the palace is pretty secure," said Suki. "None of the people coming in or out today were up to anything, if that's something you were worried about."

Zuko smiled. Thankfully, it wasn't. By now, it was reasonably likely that no one would attempt to orchestrate an outright assassination in broad daylight. That was what had worried Captain Lang most in the beginning, so he had enacted stringent security measures with guards escorting all palace visitors and the Imperial Firebenders following Zuko around everywhere. But with the progress of the interrogations and the addition of the Kyoshi Warriors to the palace guards, Lang had relaxed.
"Chasing criminals around town really feels like old times," Ty-Lee remarked, rising up and down on her toes with her hands on her hips. "We've been tracking down the people who know that general guy, but so far we haven't gotten anyone else who had a flyer." She bent backwards into a bridge pose. "But Suki and I did catch a guy who tried to steal a lady's rice cakes right from her window!"

Suki laughed. "Yeah, that was one crazy robber. You should've seen it – this lady had a bunch of rice cakes on a table and he just swung down on a rope and took them all. Then he tried to escape by the street, but, well, we caught him. He had to bring the cakes back."

Ty-Lee stood upright again and giggled. Despite his clouded mood, Zuko felt a laugh escape him as well.

"I guess the fact that no one else here has those flyers is a good sign," Mai said. "And if the guy left, then he obviously felt that he wouldn't be safe here."

"Yeah, you've got a point," said Suki. "Though Lang's still pretty worried. He'll probably keep me and Ty-Lee on for another few weeks, or at least until we find out what happened to General Mak."

"Not a problem with me!" Ty-Lee said.

Suki nudged her playfully. "Yeah, but the whole reason we came here was to guard the Fire Lord."

Zuko smiled. "It's okay, Suki, I understand. Captain Lang and I talked it over and it's absolutely no problem." He paused. "Besides, I hear you guys are helping the police out quite a lot. They've learned some good moves from you."

Suki winked. "Well, it's not all our moves."

Ty-Lee began to punch the air with her fists. "Chi-blocking is actually really easy to get the hang of. All you have to do is demonstrate it for someone a few times and they'll learn it."

"Well don't teach it to the whole world," said Mai. "Otherwise you'll have nothing to surprise your opponents with."

"I'm not teaching it to the whole world, I'm just doing it for my friends!" Ty-Lee glanced at Mai and tilted her head to the side. "I could teach you too, if you want."

"Thanks, but I think I'm good with what I've got." Mai lifted one of her metal daggers from her pocket and smiled. She looked over to Zuko. "It might be good for you to learn, though, Zuko. It might come in handy."

Zuko smiled. "Yeah, probably." Needless to say, a Fire Lord had to keep his firebending and fighting skills in form, though lately he hadn't had much time to practice. Still, a brief session shooting flames into thin air did help alleviate his nerves.

Suki stepped forward. "Anyways, Zuko, I just wanted to let you know that I'll get more of my girls on overnight duty. I think it's a good idea, given what's happened."

Zuko nodded. "Thanks Suki, I appreciate it."

Suki smiled and bowed, Ty-Lee following suit.

The two Kyoshi Warriors left, continuing their conversation, their voices and laughter fading down the hall. Mai stayed, and when the servants had closed the doors behind them, she approached the
throne and gave Zuko a smile. She came around beside him and laid a hand on his arm.

"You seem down," she said.

Zuko covered a yawn with his hand. "I haven't been sleeping these past few days."

"What time have you been going to bed?"

"Past midnight each day."

Mai tilted her head to the side. "Try going earlier."

"I can't. Either I have something to do, or letters to write… or I try to go to sleep early and I can't fall asleep." Zuko leaned his head on his hand. "It's a losing situation no matter what."

"Why do you need so much time to write letters?" Mai asked.

Zuko sighed. Most of the letters he received were only half a scroll long, but for some reason his replies took up entire pages. On top of that, he felt the constant need to perfect everything, going through two drafts and meticulously rereading his writing to make sure he sounded professional and not like an idiot. But he didn't want to tell Mai that. So he simply shook his head. "They give me a lot to think about."

Mai nodded and shifted her gaze away from him, at the same time coming to sit on the arm of the throne and leaning against his shoulder. Her slow manner of speaking and lengthy pauses were calming, and despite her silence Zuko felt comfortable with her. When he could, he invited her over to stay at the palace for entire days, and they would spend hours alone eating and talking, walking arm-in-arm in the garden, making jokes about palace life and overly-fancy nobles like they didn't have a care in the world. He'd always feel a pang of sadness when he watched the palanquin bearers take her away again, back to her own house, leaving him back with his thoughts. Zuko was starting to contemplate inviting Mai to live with him permanently, but wasn't sure how her family would react. And he was afraid of distracting himself too much by her presence, so their interactions had to be kept to a few times a week.

"So how are things at home?" Zuko asked, after a few moments.

"Well, we've settled back in to our old house," Mai replied. "Tom-Tom's almost ready to go to school, so my parents are busy with him. They want to send him to the young boys' school. The one you went to."

Zuko smiled.

Mai's gaze went up towards the ceiling. "My mother can't stop talking about it. She's buying him clothes, making sure he knows all his characters…" A rare hint of a smile crept up her face.

"I should come visit someday," Zuko said.

"That would be great. She loves you." Mai's smile lingered, but a moment later, it dipped. "My dad's been really busy lately. He's always going off somewhere in the evenings to do extra work." She looked at him. "Is it something for you?"

Zuko frowned. "Actually, he hasn't sworn his loyalty to me yet. I don't think he's even been called in for questioning. So he's not working in the palace."

"Oh. Well I guess he must be getting ready to talk to you. I know he wants to improve his image."


Going down as the governor of New Ozai probably wouldn't be much of an honor."

Zuko chuckled faintly. "Yeah... How about I'll come talk to him myself, sometime this week? I'm sure we can get it over with pretty quickly. Then he can start working here."

Mai smiled. "That'd be great."

They sat together in an amiable silence. After a moment Zuko glanced at Mai again. "Remember that weekend we were on beach? On Ember Island?"

Mai gave a quiet laugh. "Yeah. I remember we were both mad at each other over something stupid."

"Yeah, I thought you liked that one guy at the party just because he said hello to us."

"And I was annoyed and angry all day, and you kept trying to cheer me up. So you bought me ice cream and dropped it on my leg."

"Ha!"

They both burst into laughter, their voices producing light, happy echoes. Zuko scooted forward on the seat and wrapped an arm around her. "We should go back one day. Me, you, Ty-Lee, Suki, Aang, and everyone. It'll be just like old times. Only better."

Mai's eyes were still twinkling. "I'd like that."

Just then, another knock came, and one of the golden doors swung open. "My lord, Generals Song and Shinu are here!" said a guard.

Zuko quickly leaned away from Mai and nodded. "Okay. Tell them I'll be right with them."

He waited for the guard to leave, then stood up with Mai and grasped her hands. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mai squeezed his hands in return. "See you tomorrow."

She wrapped her arms around Zuko's neck in a hug. They pulled apart, then Mai placed a hand on his cheek and kissed him briefly. Finally, she stepped down from the pedestal and left through a side hallway. Zuko sat down and called for the servant to bring in the next group.

…

The round of meetings lasted until the early evening, after which the palace emptied again. Zuko took a break for dinner, enjoying the silent company of the servants and guards, then afterwards, he stepped out onto the top balcony of the palace to await his final guest of the evening. The sky had dimmed to a shade of deep blue, with hints of purple near the horizon. Zuko looked out into the empty stone square that surrounded the palace, then at the sleepy city beyond it, a collection of little lights from streetlamps and houses. How strange it felt. He saw so many people during the day, but all of them were just passing through, coming and going to finally return to a separate place of belonging. In the end, he was the only one here.

Zuko waited at the balcony, leaning with his back on the handrail, feeling the cool breeze on his face. Then after a few minutes, he saw a tiny dot appear on the horizon. It grew larger to reveal a streamlined, winged form, and the figure of a boy clutching on to the contraption from below. Once he saw his friend's eyes, Zuko smiled and waved.
Aang did a graceful upward turn, tracing an arc in the air and landing on his feet on the balcony. Momo dove down in a similar fashion moments later, landing first on the boy's shoulder then scampering down to the floor. Aang folded up his staff and placed it aside, bowing to Zuko with a smile. "Your Majesty!"

Zuko waved his hand. "Knock it off. You can still call me Zuko."

The eleven-year-old Avatar bowed again, in comical, not-quite-graceful motions he had picked up from watching the nobles. "As you wish, Fire Lord, Your Fireness!"

Zuko felt a laugh escape him. At the same time, Momo spread out his wings and flew up to Zuko's arm, and Zuko reached into his pocket and tossed him a large berry. The winged lemur caught it and gratefully gobbled it up, settling down on the railing.

Zuko approached the railing and leaned over it, facing the city. Aang came to stand beside him. He had grown taller since the coronation, his head now above Zuko's shoulder. There was also a look of peace and contemplation in his eyes, a subtle, yet telling development from the boy Zuko had first come to know over a year ago.

A moment of silence passed between them as they both looked at the distant sea of lights. Finally, Zuko spoke. "So how was it?"

Aang let out a breath. "I did what you asked. Appa and I flew over the Earth Kingdom for a few days after we dropped Toph off at her hometown. People are happy that the war is over, but Ba Sing Se really is as bad as your ministers are saying."

"Where is the Earth King?"

Aang's expression clouded. "I don't know. He left Ba Sing Se with us after the coup, then when we reached the outskirts he disguised himself as a villager and went off with his bear. He said he wanted to tour the world. But I don't know where he went or where he was during Sozin's comet. I asked people everywhere I could, but none of them ever saw a guy with a bear. I don't even know if he's alive or not."

"Well, if he is, he'll either have to reclaim the throne or sit back and let someone else take over."

"And it better be someone responsible, otherwise we could get another Long Feng on our hands," Aang added.

Zuko bobbed his head in a nod. "The only problem is, how will we know?"

A silence settled in. Aang turned to look at him. "Zuko, I'm sure it'll be fine. If King Kuei is alive, he won't turn his back on his people. He'll make sure he gets back to Ba Sing Se and retakes the throne. And if he's not... well, then we'll just have to wait and see how the people of the Earth Kingdom work it out for themselves. I don't think we should try to use force to get them to fix their government faster. The end of the war and the Dai Li is a probably lot to take in for them."

"That's what I think too. But I don't have the luxury to wait. I have a whole country waiting on my word now. And we have colonies in the Earth Kingdom. They're a symbol of a century of war and oppression... but they're ours. I'd give them their independence in a heartbeat, but another general said that would be like abandoning them. There are Fire Nation citizens there who were born there, and families that have both earthbenders and firebenders and consider themselves part of both countries." Zuko crossed his arms and looked down at the floor. "It would almost be easier if Kuei didn't come back. Then I could use the chaos in Ba Sing Se as an excuse to keep order..."
in the colonies. But if he does… then he might want them back. And everyone here will expect me
to defend them. But I don't know what to do."

Aang looked at him. "Just take it slowly, Zuko. Get as much information as you can, then follow
what your heart says is right."

Zuko looked at Aang, who met his gaze steadily, gray eyes pensive. On the one hand, Aang's words
sounded hopeful and self-explanatory… but already, to a different part of his mind, they were empty.
Following one's heart, he now knew, was just a fancy way of saying that one applied their own
judgment at the expense of someone else's. And Zuko's judgment was conflicted. Bizarrely, the only
way he could calm the chorus of arguing voices in his mind seemed to be to add even more to their
fold, to expose himself to even more opinions to make it likelier that the solution he constructed
would please the greatest number of people. But whatever decision he made in the end, it would still
be derived from other people's opinions – affirming some, discarding others.

What else was there to appeal to?

That night, Zuko took a different route to the family wing. The thought was that the more routes he
memorized, the more comfortable he'd be walking about on his own. He had already procured a
builder's map of the palace for himself and studied it in his free time. It was outdated by a decade or
so and probably left out a lot of extra passageways and rooms that had been added on by his father,
but he could fill those in himself when he discovered them.

Zuko continued down a series of long, empty corridors, and finally reached the end of one and made
the available turn to the right. This led him to a wider hallway that would connect to the one leading
to the library, then to the private wing.

But as Zuko passed the library, he noticed something and stopped. There was a red-clad figure
inside, an old man approaching a shelf with a book in his hands. He was wearing a tall, spiked hat
that matched the ruby color of his robes, the traditional head garment of the Fire Sages.

Zuko approached the doorway, just as the sage placed the book onto the shelf and noticed him. It
one of the four who had crowned him, with a long gray beard.

The sage turned to Zuko fully and bowed. "Fire Lord Zuko."

Zuko pressed his hands together in a symbol of respect as well and stepped into the room. "Sage
Khufu. Are you still up at this hour?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I just wanted to replace a book of astronomical charts I had taken for copying.
The other sages and I are currently working on improvements and organizational matters in the
temple."

A smile traced Zuko's face. "Interesting. I guess I'm not the only one reorganizing, then."

The sage smiled as well and inclined his head. "Yes, Your Majesty, we have received word of your
endeavor to clear the palace of its old burdens. Our revisions are in a similar spirit, though they are
more concerned with how we will record and communicate information in the future."

"Really? Hm. So, what are you planning on doing?"

"Well, Your Majesty, much of what is stored in the Dragonbone Catacombs is incomplete. Many of
our books and scrolls have been loaned out in years past and lost, sometimes even within the palace
itself. In addition we have some things that we feel would be beneficial to make available to others.
We would like to cooperate more closely with you and the palace officials to make sure that nothing
is lost or suppressed."

Zuko nodded. "Of course. That sounds like a great idea." He looked at the bookshelf. "So... you
were copying those charts, huh?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I worked for two weeks, observing the night sky for reference."

Zuko's eyebrows climbed. "You stayed up for all those nights?"

Khufu smiled. "It's not as great a feat as it seems. I've become used to the nocturnal lifestyle over the
years."

"Wish there was a way I could do that. Maybe then I could last through the whole day..."

The sage's eyes twinkled. "One is either the sun or the moon, alas one cannot be both."

Zuko stood with the sage in silence for a moment, then a thought occurred to him. "You know, I've
hardly ever seen the Fire Sages around the palace. You're always here for ceremonies and weddings,
but you never just walk around like the other nobles or the Imperial Firebenders. I know you serve
the Avatar, but what is it exactly that you do here?"

"We do tend to keep to ourselves, Your Majesty. No doubt you've observed that as Crown Prince. It
was not always that way; in the past the Fire Lord always conferred with the Fire Sages, and many
had them present during council meetings. The practice waxed and waned, but the tradition was
finally broken by Fire Lord Sozin. His style of rule was carried on in spirit by Fire Lord Azulon and
Fire Lord Ozai." Khufu eyed Zuko in good humor. "What happens in your reign, though, is entirely
up to you, Your Majesty."

Zuko smiled slightly. "Well, I've been a tradition-breaker so far." He crossed his arms. "But it seems
strange that Azulon would shun you. Wasn't he spiritual? From what I remember, he was really into
divining things." And making people suffer for it, he added mentally.

Khufu bowed his head. "It is a long and complicated tale you ask for, young Fire Lord. Longer than
a single night can tell. But perhaps I can tell it, at a later time." He paused and looked up after a
moment. "Your Majesty, there was a matter that the sages wanted to bring before you. We were
planning on requesting your presence at the temple at a later date, but perhaps you would like to
accompany me now?"

Knowing he had only a dim prospect of falling asleep for the next three hours, Zuko nodded. "My
pleasure."

He followed Khufu outside the palace, to the temple positioned just north of it. It was a low-lying
building with a pointed, stacked pagoda roof similar in design to the palace's. Torches illuminated the
stone walkway that led up to the entrance.

A pair of Fire Sages greeted them at the entrance. Khufu nodded to them, and they proceeded inside.
Zuko had been in the temple before, when he had quested for Sozin's past under the guidance of his
uncle. The sages had simply lurked in the shadows then, and Zuko had perceived them almost as
ghosts, the temple's silent, perpetual inhabitants. But now, as he looked around at them, he began to
notice the things they were doing. One sage stood by a narrow window and was looking out at the
sky, scrawling a diagram onto a piece of paper. Another one sat at a table in a room, arranging what
looked like leaves and sticks in various patterns on a table. Three simply stood together in a corner
with their backs turned, looking down at a burning flame.

Khufu led him not to the catacombs this time, but up a stairway to a long, low room. Six sages were gathered inside, their faces illuminated by flickering torches that lined the walls. At the head of the room, atop a pedestal that resembled an altar, was a large mechanical contraption made of gold. In the center was a pair of scales, holding two orbs on either side. One was white like a star and the other black and glimmering. Beneath the scale's arms was a large clear compartment that contained a thin, burning flame. As Zuko stepped closer, he noticed that the white and black orbs were slightly out of balance, the dark one dipped an inch lower. One sage was measuring the angle of the incline.

Zuko followed Khufu to the center of the room, where all the sages noticed him and bowed. Zuko looked around at them, then at the contraption. "What is that?"

"This is the Rift Scale, Your Majesty," said Khufu. "It was built by the first Fire Lord. It shows the harmonic state of the two realms that make up the spirit world. The white orb represents the Realm of Light, and the black one represents the Realm of Darkness. Both must always be in balance. The flame at the center indicates the strength of convergence between the spirit world and the material world. When the flame is strong and bright, the rift is thick, and when it is thin and slight like it is now, the rift is thin."

Zuko blinked in confusion. "The... rift?" he repeated. "What's the rift?"

"The rift is the space that separates the material world from the spirit world," Khufu explained. "It is that due to which both worlds retain their individual properties and do not collapse onto each other. The rift grows thin and thick depending on various processes in our world and the spirit world, most notably the motion of the moon. During full moon, the rift thins, and the two realms come close to converging. During new moon, it thickens, and the realms drift farther apart."

Zuko nodded slowly, frowning as he processed this. "I've heard about that... isn't that what makes waterbenders more powerful at night during the full moon? And firebenders during the day?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," a second sage replied. "Additionally, the state of the rift is affected by the solstices. Currently we are nearing the winter solstice, which is the shortest day of the year, and also the point when the rift is naturally at its thinnest. This is a particularly eventful time in nature, as the spirit world draws close and benders receive a greater flow of energy. This is unconscious to most people, but the perceptive may be able to sense it."

Khufu strode over to the feeble flame. "All of these changes to the rift are cyclical and natural, Your Majesty. The boundary thins, then restores itself, always staying within a safe threshold. But due to the events of the war, the rift has thinned to a point dangerously below its norm. A century of violence, particularly the obliteration of the Air Nomads as well as the subsequent loss of millions of other lives, has stirred up analogous chaos within the spirit world. The dark spirits have become more active, and as a result, their realm has started to encroach upon the Realm of Light." He pointed to the black stone, which was currently heavier than the white one. "The dark spirits represent chaos and destruction. When they break into the home of the light spirits, they approach the rift and begin to eat away at it, in an effort to disrupt the equilibrium. Though the imbalance is currently small, subtle motions stir bigger ones. And events in the spirit world mirror those in the material world. Which means..."

"Which means that if there's chaos in the spirit world, there's chaos in our world too," Zuko finished. Khufu nodded. "Precisely. So you see that what humanity sows becomes what it reaps. For a century we have sowed war and sorrow, and I fear that if we do not take action soon, we will get war and sorrow in return, but this time it will come from the world beyond." He turned back to the
contraption. "In the past, Fire Lords were aware of this mirror-like connection between our world and the spirit world. As I am sure you know, Your Majesty, the Fire Lord was originally a Fire Sage himself. He was our leader, the Great Sage."

"Yes, I know," Zuko said. "And after that, the Fire Lord became independent. That's why you're the Great Sage now."

"Yes. But it was still the policy of the Fire Lords thereafter to adhere to our practice – to attain spiritual enlightenment and bring the spirits' peace to earth. This is indeed what the first of the monarchs tried to do. But as the centuries wore on, this tradition was forgotten. The Fire Lord grew secular, the role of the Sages reduced to ceremony. After all, we consider ourselves loyal first and foremost to the law of the spirits, which is often spoken through the voice of the Avatar. Many Fire Lords did not like this, as they interpreted it as meaning that we were not loyal to them."

A third sage spoke up. "But we believe that you, above all others, have seen the importance of preserving the balance of the two worlds. You have seen the consequences of the war firsthand, and you have trained and fought alongside the Avatar. Much like you both, we want to prevent any such conflict from happening again. Modern Fire Lords have loved to speak of balance, but very few of them understood what this actually means. Even Azulon did not, and I'm afraid your father continued in his vein. Now the people of the Fire Nation are all but disconnected from their spiritual ties, which is a dangerous situation for a people to be in. We call upon you, as Fire Lord, to help us fix what was broken and maintain the two worlds' equilibrium. We offer you guidance, as well as our loyalty, and in return we ask that you keep these matters in mind during your rule."

Zuko looked at the sage and gave a nod. "I will. I promise."

The Fire Sages all bowed to him, standing on either side of the Rift Scale with its ever-burning flame, and Zuko felt a strange feeling of gravity. He was suddenly reminded of the eternal flame that the Sun Warriors had kept, whose purpose and history he could now only guess at. As one, the sages turned back and looked at the two orbs, and Zuko approached as well, taking the center place.

People had often called Azulon the Great Sage, always in a mocking tone, laughing at his lunacy and poor judgment. But for all the stories and rumors, Zuko now wondered if perhaps the thing that Azulon had tried to live by was the same thing that Uncle Iroh did. It wasn't a knowledge, it seemed, but more like a wisdom. A sight. A way to perceive something out there that was beyond opinion, a truth that one had to discover.

And for a minute, Zuko stood transfixed, simply looking at the flame, like the Fire Sages must have done for countless centuries. They all stood facing the fire with their eyes closed and were feeling it, listening to it. And Zuko stood there and listened too, pretending he was one of them, imagining, bizarrely, that the flame could whisper something to him.
The Doom of Silence

Commander Deng wasn’t his real name.

People had started to call him that after his promotion, but Ozai remembered him as Razu Yan. The man had seemed to come out of nowhere – or, that is, from whichever metaphorical reservoir it was where destiny harbored the Fire Nation’s future elite and endowed them with the right combination of luck and talent before sending them off on glorious paths towards their futures. It was a reservoir that Ozai himself had never been so blessed to belong to, but there was no use dwelling on that now. For much of his life, he had observed the war from the sidelines. While Iroh had been away in the Earth Kingdom, pitting raw power and determination in a face-to-face grapple with the foe, life back at home was a tangle of plans, calculations, and hierarchies.

Razu Yan came from an old noble family, one that had produced a good number of admirals and generals in the past and was regarded on its own as respectable within the palace. But so did many others in the Fire Nation military, so there was nothing that inherently set him apart from the plethora of other faces that passed through the register. Yan had had a standard career, first starting off as a navy lieutenant then eventually being promoted to captain. He was named commander after winning an argument with another captain over the best strategic position of the navy’s Southern Sea fleet, which would soon begin the raids on the Southern Water Tribe. After weeks of fruitless arguing, the captains had taken their dispute to Fire Lord Azulon, who by then had acquired the custom of sprinkling powder into a flame and whispering incantations, then sending the armies on a massive campaign to take the next city.

The hearing was held before Azulon’s war council, the generals gathered at the long table and a crowd of miscellaneous other nobles seated along the walls. And among them, Ozai himself. He had snuck into the council room without permission, but also technically without prohibition, which was enough for his twenty-six-year-old self to forsake skulking around in his rooms. He figured that as a prince, he should at least be able to partake in the administrative side of the war, though of course, by then, the 'partaking' was an illusion: Azulon had long begun to work solo. He was sitting on his throne at the head of the large room, looking on at them from the pedestal, the golden bowl of soil and leaves which had become his sole trusted advisor sitting at his feet. Ozai had taken the seat closest to the door, somewhat out of Azulon's sight, but with a plain view of the conference table, where Captain Razu Yan and Captain Yon Rha stated their points of view.

Yon Rha had researched the dangerous icebergs and currents near the Southern Pole and warned that the Water tribesmen would be able to wreck the Fire Nation's ships by manipulating the tides. Therefore, he argued that they should take down all of the Water Tribe's ships from afar using catapults. Razu had scoffed at this, saying that the tides moved in conjunction with the harmonic laws of the spiritual realm and that the only ones who could control their flow were the Moon and Ocean spirits. Therefore, they should instead observe the functioning of the tides and position their ships in such a way so that the tides would work in their favor, taking them to the continent's vulnerable places where the Water tribesmen wouldn't expect them.

Azulon had praised Razu Yan without hesitation. "Captain Yan is guided by the sight of the spirits," he had said. "Captain Rha appears to have confused himself."

Razu Yan's plan was put into action, and the first raid on the Southern Water Tribe was a success. Subsequent ones became easier as the number of waterbenders dwindled, so Yon Rha was made head of a newly-formed fleet that would specialize in southern raids to keep the tribesmen in check. Meanwhile, Razu Yan rose to become a naval commander, taking part in more important campaigns
directed against the Northern Water Tribe and the Earth Kingdom navy, some of which lasted for entire years. Whenever Yan returned to his home port, he was always surrounded by a crowd of crewmen and naval officials, who conversed with him seemingly nonstop and showed the same interest and involvement in his ideas, regardless of rank.

Then, a short while later, one of Yan's campaigns went awry. His fleet of seven ships, which had been tasked with delivering supplies to armies in the southern Earth Kingdom, encountered a particularly fearsome storm in the Southern Sea that threw them off-course. Their correspondence ceased, and after several rescue voyages in the subsequent months returned no details about their fate, the fleet was reported lost. Then suddenly, five months later, the seven-ship fleet sailed through the Great Gates of Azulon in the clear of day, the crews alive and well, the commander standing proudly at the bow of his flagship.

After that, Yan started to call himself Commander Deng. He wore his hair short with no topknots or adornments, as well as the full beard and mustache that other officers usually shaved clean after a long journey. His subordinates held him to be a savior, spreading the story of how he had guided them out of sure peril to anyone who would listen.

Apparently, a short while after the storm, the ships' steering systems had begun to malfunction, and as a result they had drifted away from their intended course. Though they attempted to send pleas for help, their messenger hawks would keep coming back the same day, confused and exhausted. Soon, even the compasses stopped working, the needles spinning around erratically, until finally the ships entered a section of ocean filled with thick white fog. Days and nights passed, but the fog did not abate, and the currents slowed to a standstill. With no wind or sails, the ships were left to drift about like iron toys. The crews resorted to living off of their cargo and warming themselves with firebending, while the lighting flickered on and off and the loudspeakers crackled with static.

Commander Yan had spent the weeks pacing about the deck in contemplation, until finally one day he locked himself up in his cabin and did not emerge. The crew and captains of the other ships feared that this would be the end, but then one morning, Yan suddenly burst out and announced that he knew exactly where to steer. The crews activated the engines using the remaining fuel and steered while Yan directed them. Within a day, the fog around them cleared, the currents picked up, and they were back in familiar waters heading towards the Fire Nation.

The story that Deng had managed to contact a spirit who had told him the proper course wasn't accepted by everyone back at home, though this was what the entire fleet insisted upon without exception. The words 'spirit' and 'prediction' had become nearly pejorative by then, as more and more officials realized that Azulon's obsession with involving spirits in the war was making them lose. But now, for the first time, the nobles had example of a success. Ministers who were skeptical of Azulon's policies found themselves interested in Deng's detailed explanations of the spiritual realm and how it influenced the goings-on of the material world. Deng's popularity grew, and soon his inner circle began to attract higher-level officials, even some of Azulon's own advisors. Thus, Deng's ideas about spiritual laws and human destiny gradually trickled into Azulon's war room.

The Fire Lord hadn't been pleased.

The only destiny, as far as Azulon was concerned, was the destiny of eternal greatness that awaited him and all the people of the Fire Nation. It was a destiny that had been written into history, uncovered by his old ancestor, the Fire Sage who had risen to become the first Fire Lord. He had consolidated the empire, but had failed to do much beyond that, and legend had it that ever since then, the world had been waiting for the emperor who would finally finish the job. It was the goal that Azulon relentlessly pursued, and he desperately contacted spirits to glean every hint of the way there that he could.
But in Deng's view, the world submitted to a higher law, which was the law of harmonic cycles. These cycles were what governed the unfolding of events within the spiritual world and the material world, which fed off of each other and influenced each other. Moreover, the cycles were predetermined and thus impossible for humans to control. In order to live in peace, humanity must instead attune itself to them, divine the pattern the two realms were following and use it to guide their actions. But if humanity transgressed— if just one group of people tried to turn the course of events in a different direction—then there would be dire consequences.

Deng spent the remainder of his career on the Fire Nation mainland, making every effort to divine the harmonic laws and alert the army when they made a wrong move in his eyes. A good number of officials were reluctant to take advice from another would-be sage, but those who sympathized with Deng and examined his recommendations argued that they were in fact strategically sound, and at any rate far better than what the Fire Lord insisted on.

Thus the generals began to fall into disputes, causing delays and sidetracks during war council meetings, as well as an unprecedented resistance to Azulon's choices of action. After uncovering Deng as the source of the opposing ideas, Azulon demoted him. He stripped him of all his military ranks and nobleman's privileges, stopping short of banishing him, likely so that the rest of the court could witness his ruination in detail. But the prescribed ruination never came. Quite to the contrary, Deng grew more erratic and convinced than ever, and was kept in the loop by his many military contacts who visited him in his residence. Admirals and generals continued to consult with him, and Deng continued to travel and make statements, many of which spread to the common people by word of mouth.

The breaking point came during the battle of Gar Sai. This was a large port city on the southern Earth Kingdom shore, and taking it would give the Fire Nation a safe place to transfer large numbers of forces to prepare for their eventual campaign to Ba Sing Se. However, Azulon's spirit guides had warned him of a powerful typhoon that would soon sweep through the area, spelling doom for any attacking army that went there. Commander Deng divined the same thing and suggested that the Fire Nation wait it out in their safe location at River End, a settlement farther inland. But Azulon had been struck by a peculiar sense of destiny and claimed that he would let the storm wreck the Earth Kingdom army then bring out the sun for his own. This would supposedly fulfill some ancient prophecy and bring about a new age for their empire.

Azulon stuck to this plan with an iron resolve, but as the months leading up to the voyage shrunk into weeks, Deng's persuasions began to stir the other officials' doubts. As Azulon's fleet of ships began to approach the Earth Kingdom, several captains and crews finally began an uprising, firing at the other ships and attempting to turn around. But they were outnumbered, and with Azulon's imperial flagship in the lead, they were quickly crushed. Once Deng was isolated as the source of their inspiration, he was immediately seized on the mainland and imprisoned.

To no one's surprise, Azulon's trick on the battlefield failed. No firebender could command the sun, much less direct its strength to a focused point. And so on the day the two armies clashed, the Fire Nation was left to fight with the earthbenders through cold rain and howling winds. The Fire Nation still pulled through, since Azulon's strategic capabilities were still intact, but the victory cost them much more than it should have. As fanatical and outlandish as he had seemed, Commander Deng had been right. And Ozai remembered wondering why his father hadn't listened. How much better a Fire Lord he would have made.

And now, of course, here he was.

Ozai breathed a sigh of the stale prison air, bringing a moment of sound to the silence.
At the very least, he hadn't fallen into the same trap as Azulon. Whatever anyone said about his ruling capabilities, he hadn't blindly followed some spirit's guidance to help him win the war. The Phoenix King plan had come about after Ba Sing Se had already been conquered, which had practically assured him of the Fire Nation's victory. He remembered how his head had spun from the surrealness of the moment. After a hundred years, he was the Fire Lord to see the end of the war. He was the one who had secured Sozin's long-sought victory. There was no more need for defenses or battle plans; he only had to decide what he would do with the world he had won. No longer would he have to follow the rules of some long-lost legends or prophecies – he could make his own. His mind had… galloped.

And now, of course, here he was.

Ozai sighed again.

He remembered how the children had lifted him up and placed him on the floor of the airship, tying together his wrists and ankles. How they had handed him over to the prison guards, who had replaced the ropes with chains. They had had to hold him up by the arms, for he had been too limp to walk.

They had brought him to the prison crater and sent the others to deliver the urgent message to the warden. And upon entering the tower, Ozai saw Poon waiting there. Not so long ago, the warden had been a supporter. He had bowed deeply when he was told that he would have to guard Iroh and had expressed his regret that the Fire Lord's brother should have fallen to such disgrace. Now, he simply stood with his arms crossed as the guards relayed Fire Lord Zuko's instructions to him. Ozai was placed into the high-security cell and Poon locked the door. The warden looked at him for a final moment through the bars, eyes narrowed, then he shook his head and left with his guards.

Ozai had lost Poon's respect then. It was absurd to the point of being comical – the Fire Lord who had become Phoenix King then quickly switched from helping his nation to spooning all the power and benefits into his own plate. Then he had singlehandedly brought down ruin on himself and on his entire operation, leaving workers like Poon with empty hands. And disillusionment. The people would want a real ruler now, one who would help them and their country attain true prosperity. Ozai wasn't that person anymore. And he didn't want to be. He was just a shadow, a bandaged-up vestige of his former self. While the world moved on, he was left in the past. He had sealed himself in their memories.

Just like Commander Deng, he'd never be anything else.

Two weeks passed since the police captain's interrogation. No one else came to talk to him. The doctor removed the gauze and stitches from Ozai's wound and did some final disinfection, then sent him back to his cell. The incident was never mentioned again, though it seemed to have had a repercussion on the guards. The girl looked at him with a troubled expression, the wisecracker in puzzlement. The guard with the ponytail didn't even look at him at all.

It also began to get colder. In the mornings there would be a noticeable chill hanging in the air, and in the afternoons the patches of sunlight that crept across his cell would no longer be as warm to the touch as they had been before. Floating chunks of meat began to appear in his soup instead of vegetables.

Thankfully it never snowed in the Fire Nation, but it did get cold enough for the palace residents to keep a fire going in their rooms. Ozai wondered how he would fare through the coming winter now that he couldn't firebend anymore. Perhaps they'd give him more blankets. Or maybe they'd flick
their hands and let him shiver. He could imagine that.

But for all its allotted leeway, the Fire Nation prison system wasn't inhumane. It was governed by laws, and that meant that even traitorous wastes of oxygen like him were allowed basic dignities, like being taken for the occasional walk. Nevertheless, Ozai was surprised when one morning after breakfast the guards came in and announced that he was due for his routine half hour. So instead of sitting away another morning, Ozai ended up outside in the prison courtyard.

The courtyard was located along the side of the crater, a large, oblong space enclosed by a low stone wall. Inside it was paved with cobblestones and bordered at the far end by a garden of trees and shrubs. Despite the crater walls reaching high overhead, Ozai could still feel the occasional breeze that stirred the thinning tree crowns, making the clumps of fallen leaves scatter. Autumn was receding; soon the trees would be bare.

There were no other prisoners in the yard except for him, the only other people in the vicinity being the guards stationed at the entrance and the one escorting him. They had unbound Ozai's hands but left his ankle chains on, so he couldn't take too big of a step. Ozai paced around, his hands behind his back, as if he were on a regular stroll by the palace. Occasionally he heard footsteps and the clink of a spear from the guard who trailed behind him. Kinchil was his name. He knew all their names now.

Ozai walked to the edge of the paved area, stopping at the edge of the grass. He looked down at some flowers that were blooming, then higher at the black crater wall, where the sky hung overhead, gray but light. The chill in the air brought a shiver to his back, making everything light up with a strange, lucid clarity.

He stood like this for a long time, watching the clouds. From behind, he heard the spear clink again and turned slightly to see that the guard had leaned against it, looking up at the sky as well.

Poor youth, Ozai thought. To willingly confine himself to a place like this, in the prime of his life. But it probably felt different on the other side of the bars. The guard was part of a team, after all. He had friends. A purpose.

Ozai blinked and spanned his gaze across the entire compound, lingering on the white prison tower, buried in the crater like a giant elephant tusk. Would this really be it now? Would he really die like this? After all the hectic crises of his life, the last of it would pass in the utter stillness and emptiness of a cell. Or perhaps some final drama would stir up around him a few decades down the road and Zuko would simply have him executed.

And he wouldn't have admonished Zuko one bit for it.

Ozai let out a slow sigh. He watched a bird fly past the crater and found himself in thought. After Zuko had defeated Azula, where had he taken her? Assuming that the battle hadn't been to the death... but if it had, then wouldn't the police captain have told him? Rubbed it in his face between punches? The man was a high-ranking noble, so surely he had to know what had happened. There was always the option that he had simply wanted to keep Ozai guessing, but Ozai preferred to think that Zuko had simply put Azula into another prison and wanted to keep a secret where. And at any rate... some part of him still clung to the belief that Zuko wouldn't have killed her. Even if he had had the power to.

Ozai thought over the issue some more, but finally he dropped it. Even if he did guess right, he would never know. He wouldn't know anything about them anymore, so he might as well stop thinking about them. The fact that they were all genetically related to each other meant as good as nothing now. Zuko's real family were his friends, the people who had been there with him during the trials of his life.
With the exception, perhaps, of one person. Ursa. She hadn't been there for a fairly large portion of his life, but Zuko would still search for her. Perhaps, one day, he really would find her. Would Zuko tell him if he did? Probably not. Would Ursa even want to come see him? Ozai wasn't sure she would. The only evidence he had of her current attitude towards him was the ambiguous tone of their final conversation, almost ten years ago.

Back then, he had been certain it had been for the best. Banishing her before Azulon's death announcement would remove suspicion from her, and collaterally, from him. The public would think she was an adulteress, sure. Or that he had found a new lover. But never that she was a co-conspirator in a murder, because for all anyone knew, she hadn't even been in the palace when Azulon had passed. Ozai's original plan had been for Ursa to leave, then a couple days later to slip Azulon the poison in his nighttime tea. Then he would enter Azulon's chambers again the next morning, pretend to discover his father's death, and ascend to the throne double-stricken by tragedy. Unfortunate, but not entirely unusual. He'd stage an investigation, announce the execution of some imaginary noble, then, a year or so into his reign, Ursa could come back. They could have staged a make-up or an official pardoning. With him as Fire Lord, anything would have been possible.

But no... he had never heard from Ursa again. If her whereabouts were unknown to Zuko, then to Ozai they were an absolute enigma. Had she really never had the urge to write to him? Or, if she hated him in the extreme, even to sneak a glimpse of her children? It simply didn't make sense.

The thing Zuko didn't know was that long before he would start searching for his mother, Ozai had searched. He had sent people to the surrounding cities, to the countryside, even to her hometown of Hira'a. No one had found a single trace. All that was left of her in the old village was a boarded-up house. Now, Zuko was about to repeat the process. Ozai wasn't sure how far he would get. Because from all the evidence he had gathered, from all he knew of her and from what had happened to them in their youth, Ozai could come to only one conclusion.

Ursa had entirely vanished from their world.

…

That same day, ten miles off the coast of the Fire Nation, another morning routine was starting. Azula opened her eyes and looked over to the closed wooden blinds on her window, stripes of light seeping through their gaps. She yawned and stretched, grateful in the back of her mind that the nurses had finally stopped strapping her in. What Kira had said about getting used to the serum seemed to have held water as well, for Azula no longer felt as lightheaded upon waking as she had before.

She hopped off the bed and twisted open the blinds, letting sunlight flood into the bedroom. Moments later, the door opened and Isla stepped in with a breakfast tray. The nurse brought the round wooden table to the center of the room and set the tray down, along with teacups and silverware.

"Got a new shipment today," Isla said, giving a brief smile.

Azula approached the table and saw that the tray had a bowl of cinnamon rice porridge, apples, and two eggs. Her eyebrows climbed. "Wow."

Isla added the usual bottle of serum to the assortment, and while Azula sat down to eat, she began to busy herself with the bed. "I'm going to change your sheets and blanket," Isla said. "The weather reports from the mainland say it's going to start getting colder this week. We'll have to bundle up." She gathered up the bedsheets into a ball. "The crews are working on the vent system too, so maybe we'll be able to bring some heat in here directly soon."
Azula lifted an eyebrow sardonically. "No firebending, huh?"

"Nope," Isla returned.

"In the palace, we had fireplaces," Azula drawled on, munching on an apple slice. "You could keep the fire there so that you didn't have to use bending all the time."

Isla's gaze flickered to the tiny air ducts on the ceiling. "For that you need a ventilation system... Unfortunately the builders haven't finished remodeling ours yet. When they do, we can start keeping a fire in the lounge and warm everything up through there." Her gray eyes flickered down to Azula again.

Azula scraped out a few more spoonfuls of porridge and swallowed them down. "So what am I doing today?"

"Talking to Dr. Low and physical therapy," Isla replied.

"What's everyone else doing?"

Isla gave a shrug. "Cooking, cleaning, eating. Nothing extraordinary, really. I have some bases to stew –"

"Did I really pour out that much?" Azula snapped.

Isla shook her head briskly. "No, no, it has nothing to do with that. It's just that I have to keep a steady supply going. You do use the medicine, after all. And some things I have to start in advance because they have to sit for a long time."

"Oh." The sudden flare of annoyance receded. Azula simply looked at Isla in silence, and the nurse looked at her, holding the bedsheets and blanket in her arms. After a moment, a frown creased Azula's forehead. "So is that all you do all day? Brew serums?"

"Not all day," Isla said. "I read, too. I sit outside."

Azula felt a flicker of forlornness. "Why don't I get to go outside?"

Isla's gaze trailed to the window. "Well, before it was for obvious reasons..."

"I'm not trying to escape!"

"– but then there's also the factor of the serum!" the nurse rushed to explain. "It might not seem like much when you're inside, but when you're in the sun the rays act to stimulate your chi and prime you for firebending. And since your chi is already being taxed by the serum, the sun's stimulation will send your body into overdrive mode and you'll suffer extreme exhaustion." She lowered her chin, her gaze now matter-of-fact. "The plan right now is to first get your neuromuscular condition back into balance, and then start doing bending exercises that will help you maintain that balance when using fire." Isla paused, and seeing the ever-increasing incredulity creeping into Azula's scowl, she pursed her lips and sighed. "But if you want... we could take you out in the evenings. In the wheelchair."

Azula smoothed her expression and gave a prim lift of the eyebrows. "That would sure be nice."

A smile played on the edges of Isla's mouth. "Good. Then I'll let Dr. Low know, I guess." She stepped back and turned for the door.
But before she could leave, Azula held up her teacup. "Hey, what kind of tea is this? It's good."

Isla stopped, looking over. "Oh, it's Ceylon and dried mango…" But right then she seemed to notice something and trailed off. Frowning, she stepped towards the table, and when her gaze fell on the teapot she gave a gasp, drawing back. "Oh no." Isla threw the bedsheets back onto the bed. "I'm so sorry. I accidentally gave you mine. The pots look so similar…"

Azula, who had taken another swallow of the tea in the meantime, did a frantically double-take and examined her almost-empty teacup with a scowl. "Why, is it bad?"

Isla was biting her lip, a strange flush creeping through her pale face. "No, no… It's just a special mixture I make for myself. Saffron and valerian. Dee gave me the recipe. You can drink it if you want to, of course, it's nothing bad, it's just…"

Azula shrugged and pushed the teapot over to her. "Well, drink it, if it's yours! There's still a lot in there, I only drank one cup."

Isla looped her fingers through the teapot and rather nervously lifted it up. She nodded. "Yes… okay. At any rate, Kira brewed more of the mango, so there would be enough for you and the doctor."

Azula swept out her palm. "There you go."

Isla stepped back. She looked at the bedsheets and began to awkwardly gather them up with one arm. A question passed through Azula's mind and she leaned out of her chair. "What's saffron and valerian for?"

Isla turned towards the door in profile. "I get tired a lot," she said. "It's my fault. I do it to myself."

For some reason Azula felt a flicker of annoyance and confusion at this. "Well, then don't."

Isla looked back at her and flashed a ghost of a smile. "If that were easy, I suspect Dr. Low wouldn't have much to do…" With the, she turned and went out the door.

She came back a minute later with the right tea and set the pot down at the center of the table. She poured Azula a cup, took away her empty breakfast tray, and swiftly departed. In the fleeting moments while she walked away Azula vaguely wondered what her statement had meant, but failed to assemble the proper words in time to ask her. Before long, Isla was gone and she was left alone again.

But a few minutes later, another beat of footsteps approached, and Dr. Low himself walked in, right on schedule. He had abandoned his military uniform and instead wore a light red smock over black clothes, which he had taken to doing over the weeks. Now he looked just like a doctor on the mainland. He greeted her with a smile. "Good morning, Azula."

"Hi," Azula returned.

His presence no longer stirred any sort of reaction within her. She had gone from trying to judge an ulterior motive, to being resentful, to not caring, to being reluctantly curious, and sometimes hints of all four still colored her thoughts. Now she was just tired. She had come to think of him as a journal of sorts, one in which she jotted down her thoughts then handed off somewhere for judgment. Of course, he was the one judging her in the end, but Azula found she no longer cared.

Dr. Low got his notebook from the locked cabinet as usual and sat down at the table. He took a minute to make himself comfortable, sipping his tea and thumbing through the notebook. "So," he began. "You've been telling me a lot about your school lately. The Royal Fire Academy for Girls…"
And so far it seems like you've had a lot of mixed emotions about it." He looked up at her for confirmation.

Azula nodded, slurping some of the mango tea and savoring the new tangy flavor. "Yep."

"You were happy to have your tutors to yourself, but on the other hand you were excited to meet girls your age. And so you did. You met Mai and Ty-Lee, some other girls, and even a few of their families."

"Yup."

Dr. Low rubbed his chin in contemplation. "What had been happening at home in the meantime? Specifically, what was going on in your family, when you were five, six?"

Azula paused in drinking and rested her chin in her hand. "Well, we were all pretty okay. I don't remember anything bad from then, at least nothing that was in the open. My parents were okay with each other, too. Dad hadn't been Fire Lord yet, so he didn't have a lot to do. In the summers he and Mom would take us to Ember Island. It was a little tradition they had, even before we were born. They never said why, though; we just did it. And I really liked it. But then we stopped."

A smile glimmered on Dr. Low's face. "Ah, Ember Island. Very nice. I've gone a few times myself."

"Yeah, a lot of the nobles do."

"So what did you like about those trips?"

Azula shrugged a shoulder. "I guess just how being there made us feel. We were all together and we saw each other every day. We did everything like a team." Her gaze flickered over to the window and to the ocean behind the blinds.

No, it had been more than that… it had been that odd, pervading sense of peace that had always seemed to come over her, that sense that everything was all right and that all the things she had worried about in the palace were as small as grains of sand. There had been a large meadow of grass near the shore that they had walked through, and she had loved diving through the knee-length blades as a child, playing chase games with Zuko and feeling him playfully push and pinch her while she hobbled through the hills and tried to catch him. Ursa and Ozai had walked behind them, smiles on their faces, and right then it had seemed like everything bad between the four of them had evaporated, all those little whispers and snide remarks washed away and forgotten. They were just a family, like all the others surrounding them.

"… Azula?"

Azula blinked, her surroundings coming back into focus at the sound of Dr. Low's voice. "Huh?"

"You were talking about why you liked the island?" said Dr. Low.

Azula gathered her thoughts again and gave a nod. "Oh. Yeah, well, it's like I was saying. We just spent some time together and it was nice because there wasn't any stress like there was at the palace. One year Uncle even joined us. He was jealous because we were having so much fun without him. He brought along Cousin Lu Ten too."

Dr. Low nodded, his gaze attentive.

"That was the last year I saw him," Azula continued. "Lu Ten, I mean. After that he went to the army. Well, then a few months later, the Ba Sing Se invasion started." Her gaze flickered to the
lower cabinets. "He died fighting. Uncle didn't really say what happened in his letter, but I found out later. They'd breached the wall and he gave the order for Lu Ten's division to batter the city's inner defenses with everything they had, and they did. Lu Ten fought right in the front lines. But then they started to bring back bodies and Lu Ten was one of them. Uncle had him buried there. I thought that was stupid – he should've been brought back to the Fire Nation, not left to rot in enemy territory." Azula crossed her arms. "But he never really cared about any of that stuff."

"What stuff?" asked Dr. Low.

"Just stuff that you're supposed to do. Like bring a dead soldier back to his rightful home where his family is. Or stay and conquer the city your son died fighting for instead of quitting and leaving." Azula scowled. "I thought that was really selfish of him."

Dr. Low studied her. "You mentioned a while ago that your uncle played favorites. How was your relationship with him overall?"

Azula shrugged. "I didn't like him when I was a kid. Still don't."

"Why not?"

Azula crinkled her nose in displeasure. "He was just... airheaded. It was like he half didn't care about what was going on around him. I mean, I could tell he could do a lot and he obviously wasn't stupid, but it just seemed like because of that he thought he was too good for the world." She lowered her gaze. "For a whole month after he came back from Ba Sing Se, he spent all his time sitting in some temple crying over Lu Ten, while everyone else back home was scrambling to try to fix his mess. He didn't even care that his men were completely demoralized after fighting so hard and being let down like that, or that we lost our once-in-a-lifetime chance to get the upper hand. But heavens forbid someone tried to tell him all that and snap some sense into him, because he's mourning."

She scowled. "Zuko loved to say that."

Dr. Low wrote this down. "Was Zuko close to Iroh?"

Azula nodded. "Yeah. A lot closer than I was. Iroh always doted on Zuko more when we were younger, but then after Lu Ten died, the both of them sort of... clung to each other. It was weird." She paused. "Well, then Uncle went with Zuko when Zuko got banished. I guess that really speaks for itself. I know he definitely wouldn't have gone with me if I'd been banished."

Dr. Low nodded and continued to jot things down.

"But the thing with Zuko is that he made it seem like I didn't even care about Lu Ten, which wasn't true," Azula went on. "I did care. But I was logical about it."

"People mourn in different ways," said Dr. Low. "It's usually not a good idea to assume that someone isn't feeling the same thing you are if they're not exhibiting the same behaviors as you."

"Well, Zuko did."

Dr. Low smiled. "Well, Zuko's not a professional psychologist."

Azula let out a sigh and settled back in the chair. "Yup, sure isn't."

"Now, how was your relationship with Lu Ten?" Dr. Low asked.

Azula pondered. "We didn't really have one," she said, after a bit. "He did go to Ember Island with us a couple times, but I was really little back then so I hardly remember. But I do remember him
showing me how to play Pai Sho once, when we were older. I always thought it was a stupid game. But he made it seem fun."

"Is it a relationship you wish had been stronger?"

Azula shrugged. "I guess. In a perfect world." She played idly with the teaspoon, watching her strokes make little waves in the cup.

It was strange. Even now, she could still remember that odd sense of emptiness she had felt upon learning of her cousin's passing, that moment in the garden when Ursa had received the letter. Azula had been far from a stranger to the topics of war and death; she had read dozens of memoirs and poems in school and had seen countless sketches of battles both modern and ancient. She knew the sacrifices they involved, and had noticed how certain nobles would withdraw for entire weeks after battles, mourning over lost friends and family. But the Royal Family – her family – had always seemed untouchable. Until one day, it wasn't. The vague shadow she had remembered brushing shoulders with her on a palanquin or holding his hand out to her was now gone, removed from space. And the thought had been almost too wild to come to grips with.

But then, after everyone paid their respects, life went on. Letting Lu Ten fade into the past had been easy, because he had been part of a conglomeration of so many other things with which she had been forced to do the same. Games, fun, adventure… Zuko might have perhaps had a richer relationship with their cousin than she did in virtue of being older, but all it could have amounted to were a few more hours spent together on the beach or bonding in the palace as eldest sons. Sure, those were probably fond memories, but they didn't mean that Zuko should have counted as being closer to Lu Ten than she was. Nor did it explain why Iroh had suddenly started doting on Zuko after the battle and treating him as if he were Lu Ten. Sure, Zuko was a boy and Azula was a girl, but…

Her gaze slid up to Dr. Low again, who had been sipping tea in the meantime. He seemed to have noticed her lapse into thought but had evidently decided to let her think it through. Now, as Azula held his gaze, he gave an amiable nod. "How about your relationship with your grandfather, Azulon?" he continued.

Azula thought back again, tilting her head up towards the ceiling. "It was okay," she said. "My firebending teacher would always take me to him at the end of the week to show him what I'd been practicing. But Grandpa wasn't really close with anyone, I don't think. He didn't see eye-to-eye with Dad on a lot of things either, so he ignored the rest of us even more because of that. At least, I think that's why."

Dr. Low nodded. He sat back and looked over his notes. "So, we have your father, your mother, your brother, your uncle, Lu Ten, and your grandfather. And Mai and Ty-Lee." He looked up. "Those were the people who played the biggest roles in your life. Is that right?"

Azula nodded. "Yeah." She paused. "And I guess I never really had a good relationship with any of them in the end."

"We can't expect to have an ideal relationship with every single person we come across," Dr. Low said. "You might be worried that you didn't have what people traditionally call a normal relationship with most of your family members, but that can stem from the fact that your family isn't a normal family – it's the royal family of the Fire Nation. That puts stress and constraint on everyone, and everyone reacts to it in different ways. But from what you've told me about how you met Mai and Ty-Lee, it seems like you had a perfectly normal friendship with them, although it experienced a break, as many friendships do." The doctor pursed his lips. "Though, if I'm understanding things correctly, your first problem with your peers came with this girl... Kyla?"
Azula looked down with a grumble. "Yeah."

"Did you ever see her after that school year ended?"

Azula leaned her head on her hand. "Well, the next year we got shuffled into different class groups. The school does that every year. Once, Ty-Lee even got separated from Mai and me, so we had to make plans to spend more time together. But I never had a class with Kyla again. Then everyone finished school, and we all went off to different places. I have no idea where she is now." She paused, crumpling her napkin. "I just wish I'd said something back to her then. Even pushed her, or something. I just stood there like a fool. So now she probably remembers me as the little machine girl who suffered a breakdown."

"And you remember her as the girl who called you a machine," Dr. Low said.

"Yes."

"Because it hurt your feelings."

Azula scowled. "Yes! It did!"

Dr. Low gave a shrug. "Well, then you're not."

Late that evening, the sky had darkened purple over Capital City, the last of the sunset retreating in a red splotch to the west. Zuko was sitting at Mai's dining table, feeling the cool breeze blowing from the windows.

They had finished their dinner over an hour ago, and now two of them sat playing chess, their earlier conversation faded for a concentrated silence. After some thought, Mai made a move, taking one of his figures. Zuko scrunched his face up in frustration and began to recalculate his strategy. Right then, Mai's mother appeared beside them with a pot of fresh tea.

"More tea, Fire Lord?" Michi smiled down at him warmly.

"Thank you." Zuko proffered his teacup. Michi filled his and Mai's, then focused her attention back on Tom-Tom, who was sitting on a mat by the nearby couch, flipping through a character-learning primer and practicing brush strokes.

Zuko still remembered how odd it had been when Mai had told him that she now had a little brother. Zuko had just gotten back to the Fire Nation after his three-year banishment, and the boy had been only two. Tom-Tom had been curious and playful, and could only babble out a couple words at a time. Now, the boy was talking more coherently and using longer sentences. Michi and Ukano had already registered him at the Fire Nation School for Young Boys, where he would begin his preliminary education there the following year, right after his fourth birthday.

Mai's attitude towards him also seemed to have mellowed out during the elapsed time – where before she had usually talked about him with cringes or expression of annoyance on her face, now she had begun to take on the duties of a big sister, teaching him how to paint and hold a pencil. Zuko had noticed that her demeanor had lightened as well; oftentimes there was a faint radiance lingering in her expression, even when she wasn't smiling outright. It made her look beautiful.

Presently, however, her face had adopted its focused look, gloved fingers tapping on the surface of the table in the spirit of good-natured competitiveness. She took Zuko's knight and smiled. "Ha! That's two knights and a rook. All mine."
"Urgh!" Zuko ran his fingers through his hair. "You know, I think I actually like Pai Sho better."

Mai laughed. "Come on, loser, don't be like that. What matters is you have fun."

Zuko glanced at her through narrowed eyes, smirking. "You're the worst."

Mai winked. "I know."

In the meantime, Tom-Tom was lying on his stomach, his tongue between his teeth as he scrawled some complicated character. Finally he finished and lifted the book for Michi to see. "Look, Mommy! I did it!"

Michi took the sketchpad and smiled. "That's wonderful, darling."

Mai cast Zuko a glance and shook her head, smiling as well. "Kid's a show-off," she muttered. "He followed all the teachers around when we went to visit and tried to copy what they were writing."

"Seems like he'll be a smart kid," Zuko remarked.

"Yeah, I'm gonna know all the characters in the books!" Tom-Tom called out.

"Tom-Tom, that's no way to address a Fire Lord!" Michi chided, giving her son's hair a playful tousle.

Tom-Tom's head jerked in Zuko's direction and his mouth spread into a smile. "Oh. Sorry, Fire Lord!" He stood up and gave an awkward bow, brush still in hand.

"Forgiven, young boy," Zuko responded. "Wait till your friends hear you had tea with me."

Tom-Tom laughed and jumped on his toes. "Yeah, I'm telling everyone! Fire Lord Zuko is my best friend!" He put his brush down, looking at all the dried splotches of black ink that had smudged his fingers, and went to wash his hands. Then he skipped up to their table and leaned over the chessboard. "So who's winning?"

"Mai is," Zuko said.

"Whoa, Mai, you're winning against the Fire Lord? That's impossible!"

Mai playfully pushed his shoulder away with a gloved hand. "Fire Lord doesn't equal chessmaster, smart one. Besides, I'm allowed to beat him." She looked at the board again and made another move. "Why don't you go practice those extra characters? Who knows, words like 'antiquity' and 'tranquil' might come in handy."

A dignified, purposeful expression crossed the boy's face. "I think they will. I'll bet you."

"Two copper pieces," Mai said, holding out her palm.

"Done!" Tom-Tom slapped her palm and went back to his mat. He lowered himself onto his stomach again, dipping the brush into the ink bottle, and set about his work.

Zuko met Mai's gaze again and she breathed a sigh. "If I'd been so happy about school, my parents would've probably been the happiest people on Earth."

He gave a laugh. "Hah. I bet." He paused to make a move. "Come to think of it, I was pretty much the same way as your brother. I loved school."
"Boys tend understand how important it is," Michi spoke up, sipping her tea. "Unfortunately for girls, that's not always the case." She cast Mai a motherly, matter-of-fact glance.

Mai sighed. "Well, you can't say I turned out horribly, Mom, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, of course. But still, for someone my age, the way kids are raised today is like a walk in the meadow. Back when I was in school, we would all be lined up at the start of the day – girls and boys – and if someone wasn't dressed according to school policy, they'd be sent home."

"Sounds like a prison," Mai remarked.

Michi chuckled. "Well, of course there were lots of strict policies. Hard work and respect were practically non-negotiable. And synonymous with Fire Lord Azulon's name." She gave a smile and tilt of the head in Zuko's direction.

Zuko, who had just picked up a figure, found himself pausing in thought, his gaze lingering on her.

"But it wasn't all like that, though," Michi continued. "At the end of each term we had a big dance. The boys and girls would pair up and rehearse traditional Fire Nation dances to perform in front of the staff and parents. It was a tradition left over from Sozin's time, though nearly all the schools phased it out eventually. Ours was one of the few still doing it. Incidentally, that's how I met your father, Mai."

Mai cringed and turned to look over her shoulder at her. "You two bonded over dancing? Man, that is the sappiest thing I've ever heard."

Michi sighed, nodding along to her daughter's sardonic tone. "Yes, yes, call it however many names you want, but dance is a powerful thing. Through movement you express emotion. And through emotion you discover other people. And if you're dancing with the right person, then I'll have you know the experience is quite pleasant."

Mai looked back and Zuko and widened her eyes, her classic help-me expression. Zuko laughed.

But at the same time, he felt an unmistakable curiosity stir in the back of his mind. His gaze shifted back to Michi, who was still watching them, her lips pursed with a pitying sort of humor. "You kids today just don't understand what you lost," she said. "We'd already lost a lot, my generation, but at least we got to experience some of it."

"Some cheesy courtship dances?" Mai said.

"It wasn't just about courtship, it was about celebrating love and life." Michi stood up, setting her tea set aside, and spread out the long skirt of her robe. She took a few swift steps forward, putting one foot before the other and spinning around. She traced a graceful path like this across the floor, arms lifted as if to grace a partner's shoulders, but at a midway point she seemed to forget the rest and hesitated, looking down at a hovering foot as if unsure where to place it. At last she gave up and dropped her arms to her sides. "Ah, I don't even remember the steps. It's called the Ember Waltz. It was such a beautiful dance..." Shaking her head, Mai's mother came back to the sofa and sat down. "If Ukano were here, he could show you... He was very good at it."

A frown creased Mai's forehead and she looked out the window. "Speaking of Dad, where is he? It's already dusk."

"He told me he'd have a lot to do in his office," Michi said.

"Did you tell him Zuko was coming?"
"Of course."

Mai exhaled. She leaned her head against her fist and angrily moved one of her chess pieces. "Well, that's pretty rude of him. Not coming to see the Fire Lord when he comes to visit him in his own house."

"Mai, I'm sure he's not doing this of his own free will. You know very well he has a lot of people to get in touch with, especially with all these interrogations going on."

"Whatever," Mai replied. Her voice had grown strangely curt, though as the seconds ticked by in silence Zuko couldn't gather up enough certainty to ask.

Another fresh breeze blew through, this one noticeably colder. Zuko gave a slight shiver. He looked out at the sky and saw that the red had vanished, and that nearly all the other houses in the vicinity had lit their lanterns.

He debated with himself for a few moments, then at last he rose from his seat. "As a matter of fact… I think I should get going." He looked at Mai and her mother, the both of them gazing up at him as well. "How about I just summon your husband to the palace, Michi. We can have a talk in an official setting. I think that would even be better."

Mai nodded. "Yeah, I guess that would work."

Michi rose and bowed. "Thank you for your company, then, Zuko. You'll always be a friend in this house."

Zuko inclined his head to her as well. "Thank you."

"Say goodbye to the Fire Lord, Tom-Tom!" Michi called.

From the corner, Tom-Tom got to his feet and skipped over to them. He stopped before Zuko and gave a deep bow. "Guhbye, Fire Lord!"

Zuko smiled and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Bye, Tom-Tom. Be good to your sister."

The boy nodded. "I will."

Michi led Zuko to the door and Mai followed behind him. Midway she tugged on Zuko's arm and stopped him, turning him back around to face her. She looped her arms around his neck, a smile lifting her features.

"Well, I'll see you soon."

"Definitely." Zuko leaned forward and kissed her.

Michi stepped aside to let him through the door. Tom-Tom came up moments later, and the family of three stood by the doorstep as Zuko made his way to the palanquin waiting by the street.

"Back to the palace, then, my Lord?" one of the bearers asked.

Zuko gave a nod. "Yes."

The bearers opened the veils for him and he stepped inside, taking a seat on the padded chair. He peeked back out at Mai's family, who waved to him in unison. Then the white veils closed around him and blurred them behind a sheen of gray. The palanquin began to move, traveling down the road and distancing itself from the house. Mai, Michi, and Tom-Tom continued to wave for a bit, then
once Zuko had begun to disappear into the distance they stopped and huddled together for a while, casually talking about something. The light from their cozy kitchen reappeared briefly as they opened the door to go back inside, then it swung closed behind them. That left only a tiny square window, burning a pale white just like all the others. Then gradually the house shrunk into the distance, its light vanishing among all the others and finally swallowed up by a scrim of trees.

Zuko sighed and looked down. Meanwhile, the shadow of the large black palace slowly drew nearer.
The Visitor

The summer of Sozin's Comet had faded to autumn, and now autumn was fading to winter. A stillness and silence hung over the ocean, the caws of the native gulls absent as they migrated away to warmer coasts. The glass of Azula's windows became cold to the touch in the mornings, sometimes even misting up after a long night with the heating system running. The construction crew had designed a network of pipes that ran through each room, circulating water from a central tank that someone from the night staff would keep warm. The tubes were arranged into a large, compact coil, which was mounted on the corner of Azula's bedroom as well as in all the others.

The effect was astounding. Heat emanated from the metal coils in waves and pervaded through her bedroom, as if there were an actual fireplace without the firebending. Though they weren't perfect – apparently Nira had accidentally scalded herself after leaning on one – and all the rooms had to be the same temperature. But all the staff agreed that they were a miracle, even more so having been entirely improvised on the part of the builders. Never before had Fire Nation ingenuity been put to such a test, Dr. Low joked with them, being put through so many impromptu engineering jobs on such short notice.

And it was all because of her, Azula mused to herself. Because she couldn't firebend, and because everyone else had to keep firebending to a minimum for the sake of safety. It had been quite a long time since she had seen those familiar blue flames spring up from her palms, though oddly the thought didn't stir much emotion inside her. Lately she was finding that thoughts of firebending always came with thoughts of battling, either attacking or defending, and mostly always losing. Her old self would have probably revolted at the prospect of going without it for such a long time. But the joke was on her old self – she didn't miss it.

Still, there were other things that came with being a firebender that she couldn't ignore. Little moments of realization during the recession of summer that the daylight was no longer as warm as before, and the subtle feeling of incompleteness that she always felt in the evenings as the days shortened. Warm weather came and went for a while as it always did, but now the battle was ending and winter was emerging dominant.

While it never snowed in the Fire Nation, it did get cold enough to chill buildings and keep everyone away from the beaches. In her childhood, Azula had always loved to lean by windows to see the Imperial Firebenders marching along the palace walkways, lighting all the torches. The turtle ducks in their backyard pond would go into hibernation and leave the garden still and silent. Azulon always called his lengthiest meetings on frigid days so that he and his ministers had an excuse to stay in the throne room, his customary fire curtain blazing before the pedestal.

The school recess would also start around that point, and Azula would find herself with entire weeks of free time leading up to the new year. Much of it she spent with Mai and Ty-Lee, who would come over to the villa and play games in her room while she kept the fireplace going. In those times Azula felt an almost motherlike responsibility and affection for them, the nonbenders. When warmth no longer came from the sun, fire became something to share.

Before Azula knew it, it was already the beginning of December. She woke up one morning to Nira's chipper face spread into a toothy grin. "Happy second quarter!"

Azula blinked away the residual daze of sleep and squinted. "What?"

"It's the first day of the twelfth month!" Nira said. "That means you've been here for three months already. One whole quarter! Time just flies by, doesn't it?" She stepped back towards a cart of bottles
she had brought in with her. "It also means we gotta start taking extra care of our skin. The cold can really dry you out, and all this indoor heating makes it even worse. So I wanted to give you a facial!"

Azula scowled. "How about giving me some food?"

Nira laughed. "Oh, don't worry, already five steps ahead of you!" She produced the breakfast tray from the cart and placed it into Azula's lap.

Azula groggily began to shovel the porridge into her mouth and chew it down. She hadn't gotten much sleep, and the lack of light coming from the blinds foretold an overcast day.

Nira continued to make her mixture in the meantime, tossing powders and liquids into a small mortar and singing a tune. "Winter, spring... summer and fall... Winter, spring... summer and fall... four seasons... fo-our lo-oves..."

Azula watched as her pestle turned the mixture turned into a thick, gooey cream. "This is a masque for your face," Nira explained. "It goes right over your eyes and mouth, then you leave it on for half an hour while it moisturizes you."

"What about therapy?"

"No therapy today!" Nira replied. "Dr. Low's out by the dock accepting last shipment for the year, so everyone else is just doing housekeeping. That means you get the day off too!"

At that moment Mira walked in. "Ventilation time," she announced flatly, and heaved open the window. Azula was greeted by a sudden blast of cold wind and nearly dropped her spoon.

"Aah!" Nira hugged her arms against her chest and shivered. "Mira, close it!"

"We have to ventilate the whole building. Doctor's orders." Mira walked away towards the door then stopped. "By the way, there's Fire Flakes now."

Nira's eyes glimmered. "Yes! Finally!" She clapped her hands together in elation.

Azula lifted an eyebrow quizzically and Nira turned to her, all smiles. "I put in a request for Dr. Low. Now we've got enough Fire Flakes for a whole two months!"

Azula merely grumbled, pulling the blanket higher over herself and leaning over the warm tray. Once she finished eating, Nira removed the empty plates and set down a bowl of hot water in their place. She steamed Azula's face for a minute then dipped a brush into the mixture. "All right, just relax!"

Nira began to apply the masque, dripping a strikingly thick, cool substance onto Azula's face. It was almost like a liquid, seeping into the crevices around her closed eyes and covering her mouth. Azula was left reclining in her bed, unable to speak or see, her hands clutching the metal bars.

Nira's motions were reduced to faint rustles and clangs in the vicinity. "Feels great, huh? These are all the rage in Capital City right now. I know you can get them done at the royal palace, too – I have a friend who used to be a servant over there and she says the stuff they did there was just exquisite, you'd be walking on cloud nine the whole day… But obviously she couldn't share their procedures, and when she retired she had to swear an oath that she wouldn't reveal any of their secrets. That's how exclusive they are! You're a lucky girl!"

Azula's hands were slowly tightening into fists around the metal bars of the bed. Perhaps because of Nira's voice, perhaps because of a desire for light, but despite her initial calm, some surge of panic
had sparked inside of her. The sounds and voices in the room reduced to a blur. The growing desire to open her eyes grew into a tangible discomfort, then to pain.

At last, she could no longer resist. Azula opened her eyes, but felt a sticky shell hold them down, and a scream rose up inside her throat. Suddenly feeling deprived of air, she began to claw at the thick coating with her hands, and finally she tore it off of her eyes and mouth and let out a yell.

Nira and Mira both jumped in surprise, bumping against another body, which turned out to be Isla holding a stack of towels. Azula stared out at the three nurses, white substance caked over her face with jagged openings for her eyes and mouth.

Nira rushed over. "My goodness! What happened? What's wrong?"

The panic faded as suddenly as it had come. Azula simply sat there with a deadpan gaze, her breaths ragged in her ears.

Nira's eyes flashed with understanding. She bit her lip. "Oh… you must have gotten nervous…"

Mira scowled. "You stupid wood-brain, Nira! You can't just do that to people! Especially her!"

Normally her tone would have set Azula on the offensive, but for once Mira's irritation appeared to be well-placed. Nira wiped the residue from her face with a wet cloth, wincing. "Sorry, sorry! I didn't know that bothered you, Azula, next time I won't cover your eyes, okay?"

Azula merely sank back into her pillows, grateful for the return of a steady heartbeat.

Isla continued putting away the towels in the meantime, and Mira put her hands on her hips. "Anyway," Mira began again, "the storage people just told me they need help with the food supplies. It's either you and me and the night crew, or we or we take over Kira's and Dee's job and mop all the floors."

"What am I going to do?" Azula called out. "Sit here all day?"

The three nurses looked at her.

"Dr. Low said you could go to the craft room," Mira said. "Paint, or something." She looked to Isla for confirmation.

But Azula crossed her arms. "I don't want to sit in the craft room. I want to go outside."

Nira and Mira exchanged a glance, then looked to Isla. "Is she… allowed during the day now?"

Isla cast a glance to the window, squinting her eyes. "It'll be fine. I'll take her."

Mira gave a shrug. "Well, all right."

Nira finished cleaning up her cart, then the two of them left the room. Isla pulled the wheelchair out from the corner. She helped Azula into it, and as she fastened the single torso band, Azula scowled.

"So how long do I have to keep using this thing? Aren't you people trying to make me normal?"

"Of course," Isla replied.

"Then why can't I at least walk like a normal person?"

"It's just a formal precaution," Isla said. "Besides, you're still on a regular serum dose. It'll conserve
Azula crossed her arms. "But Nira said this was a milestone, didn't she? If today's so special, then why don't you do something different for a change?"

"Well, we are doing something different. We're giving everyone a day off." Isla stepped out of the room, then came back with a large blanket. "Here." She unfolded it and dropped it around Azula's shoulders.

Azula shifted under the heavy weight, feeling herself relax against the back of the chair. She tugged the blanket closer around herself as Isla wheeled her to the front entrance room, rolling her down the ramp into open air.

The morning was gray and stormy, the sun hidden beneath a sheet of clouds. The sea whipped under a restless breeze, instantly flooding Azula's nostrils with the smell of marine salt.

The island's lone dock lay up ahead, where a Fire Nation cargo ship was berthed, its crew walking about the deck and down the ramp. A figure in a maroon military uniform stood watching them from a distance. It was Dr. Low. He had his back to the building, his topknot and shoulder plates cutting a shadowy silhouette against the sea.

The wheels of Azula chair sank into the sand and her body tremored with the motions as Isla rolled her over the shifty surface. They approached Dr. Low, and he turned around to notice them. He smiled.

"Hello, Isla."

"Hello, Isla." His gaze trailed down to find Azula. "Enjoying the outside air?"

"I only asked!" Azula shouted instantly. "I'm not trying to escape!"

Dr. Low lifted up a hand in humored surrender. "I just wanted to know if you were enjoying the air."

"Nice kind gesture on your part, since you were the one keeping me inside for almost four months straight!"

There was a pause, then Isla gave a tired smile. "Good morning, Dr. Low."

His smile acquired a warm humor. He turned back to face the ship, and Azula felt the flare of tension inside of her gradually unwind again as they watched the crew. They were unloading crates in teams and stacking them in small wagons that waited near the dock.

"Were those two dozen boxes of herbs enough?" Dr. Low spoke up.

Isla gave a nod. "Yes, thankfully… Did you get enough acupuncture needles?"

"That I did." Dr. Low breathed a sigh. "No matter how ingenious you are, some things you have to do the old-fashioned way. When I was a student I tried to engineer a way to sterilize them with firebending. I ended up melting my whole supply."

Isla chuckled. "We're all ambitious early on."

"That's for sure."

Another silence.

"Nira's ecstatic about the Fire Flakes," Isla added a moment later. "She's in the lounge with the first box as we speak."
Dr. Low laughed. "We'll have to ration them out until next year, then." He paused. "The ships don't come during the winter because most of the western docks close."

Azula realized those words were directed to her. She blinked in response. "Oh."

Another minute passed by. Azula watched as four men carried down a large, flat package draped in canvas. It took all of them to carry it from the pier and across the sand. She squinted. "What's that supposed to be?"

She was answered moments later by a flap of fabric, as a gust of wind tossed some of the canvas back to reveal a large landscape painting.

"Just some finishing touches," said Dr. Low. "Then it'll be home away from home."

Azula was silent. She watched the men as they carried the painting inside, then glanced back at the ship as the crew hauled still more things to the dock – chairs, shelves, lanterns. All the while the waves hissed in the distance and the wind continued to blow, the cold mostly kept at bay by the blanket around her shoulders. Isla still had her hands on the chair's handlebars, though there was no slope and no danger of Azula rolling away. Dr. Low had stepped back a little to be next to them, and now the both of them were standing still on either side of her, looking out at the sea. Suddenly, Azula was struck by a strange sense of emptiness. How far had they come to be here? What had they left behind?

Finally, after several minutes, Dr. Low took a step towards the dock. "Well, you two go on ahead. I'll go help out."

Isla gave a nod. She pulled on the handlebars again and wheeled Azula onwards.

They rode through the rest of the expanse in front of the building and rounded the left corner. Here the windows of Azula's bedroom, Dee's and Isla's offices, and the lounge balcony peered out at the water, spaced apart by a plain expanse of gray steel wall. The waves lapped only a short distance away, the foamy water filling in the tracks of the chair's wheels and Isla's footprints.

Azula's gaze skimmed over the ground yet to be covered, finding a clump of tall, needly trees in the distance. "So do you all take walks around here?"

"Me, not often," Isla responded. "Mira and Nira do laps, but I guess I'm the type who likes to stay put." She looked over her shoulder at the dock. "And it's easier to reach the back storage room from the other side. The trees make it hard to roll wagons."

Azula's gaze lingered on them, at the rugged barks and the tangle of shadows and branches between them that hid the rest of the shore from view. "I don't like them," she said.

"Why not?"

"They look weird. Barren." Wrong, she added mentally, but the word didn't make it out.

Isla made a curious hmm sound. "Well, I don't suppose they get a lot of nutrients. They have to be able to withstand the salt in the water, too." She stopped the wheelchair to get a better look at them. She picked up a few fallen needles from the ground and examined them in her palm.

In the meantime, Azula sank into her own thoughts. Her gaze trailed over to the back door, blank and stolidly closed. "Have you ever been creeped out by a place?" she found herself saying aloud.

"What do you mean?" Isla said. "Just frightened of it, or disgusted by it?"
"I guess both… But at the same time you feel like you can't stop yourself from going there, or thinking about it."

Isla pondered. "Well, in a way, I suppose... When I was little I was scared of the forest that bordered our village to the south. I thought it was haunted by evil spirits." She laughed a little. "But eventually I got over it."

"Is it weird to want to check out a place that's scary?" Azula asked.

"I'm not sure. Have you had that feeling before?"

"All the time. When I was a kid. And I still do."

"You have fears?"

"No, it's not exactly a fear, it's… I don't know. This feeling that something's off. And it bugs you, but it pulls you in." Azula looked up at the nurse, at her pale skin and gray eyes against the dark green trees behind them.

Isla pursed her lips into a sympathetic smile. "Well, if it bugs you constantly, then it's probably just your mind messing with you. There's really no reason to fear something if the source of danger is long gone." She paused. "I know it's not easy, though."

Azula bobbed her head in a nod.

"What places creeped you out, specifically?"

"This one," Azula said flatly.

Isla chuckled. "I'm sorry about that. Really."

"Also the old house we lived in before Dad became Fire Lord," Azula went on. "It only started creeping me out after we'd moved, though. Then the palace started creeping me out. It's really big and you can actually get lost if you're not familiar with it."

"Hm." Isla gave this some thought. "Did it… bother you often?"

Azula breathed a sigh. "I don't know. I mean, I guess not often, but it still did sometimes. It's not that I avoided it. I was scared, but that made me interested. I explored it. It's like I couldn't help it."

"Well, if it's of any comfort to you, I'd probably feel nervous living in such a big place, too. Maybe exploration is just how you deal with fear of the unknown. It seems like a reasonable reaction."

"I… guess." But for some reason, Azula felt unfulfilled at this. Isla kept pushing her chair, and Azula continued to mull over her words, but then suddenly a flicker of color tore her out of her thoughts.

At first she thought it was something in Isla's hair, but when her gaze alighted on the trees, it came again. A red flash, like a flap of clothing, shimmering out from the shadows.

Her hands flew to the chair wheels. "Stop!"

Isla jerked the chair to a halt and rushed over to her. "What's wrong?"

"There's someone there." Azula pointed out.

Isla whipped her head around. "Where?"
"In the trees. They were wearing something red."

Isla frowned and took a few steps towards the trees. "I don't see anything. Maybe it was one of the ship crew?"

Azula shook her head briskly. "No. It can't be them. They were wearing a robe." Her gaze lingered on the spot. A gust of wind blew through the branches and made the leaves rustle. Behind them, just faintly, she could still make out a shape.

Her heart began to accelerate. Isla stood only a few yards away, right in their line of sight, though the nurse didn't seem to have noticed them. Azula pounded her fist against the armrests of her chair. "They're right there! They're looking right at you!"

Isla swiveled from the trees to Azula, turning up the palms of her hands. "What do you want me to do?"

"We have to go see! It could be someone trying to attack me!"

Isla furrowed her brow. "Then it's certainly a good idea to go back inside." She went back to take the handlebars, but Azula grabbed her arm.

"No! I want to find them! If anything, you should be able to defend yourself!"

"I'm not a bender," Isla said.

The words hit Azula like a smack and she blinked in bewilderment. "Then how did they even let you work here??!

"Well, I'm surrounded by a team of firebenders, so I'm not that unprotected," Isla responded. "Also I'm probably one of only a handful of people in the Fire Nation who knows how to brew your serum, so it was either me or no one." She took the wheelchair and turned Azula towards the direction of the dock. "Come on. If you're starting to see things, we'd better get back inside."

Azula looked back at the trees. The branches were still stirring, but the shape she had seen in them before was gone. She gritted her teeth. "I'm telling you, I saw someone there! Why don't you believe me?"

Isla sighed. "First of all, because I didn't see anything myself, and second of all because you're clearly in a state of anxiety. And I'm certainly not taking you into strange woods." She pushed Azula of towards the building.

Azula rode along in dissatisfaction, nails digging into the pads of the armrests. Her head and shoulders had frozen; she couldn't bring herself to look back at those trees, yet the memory of that red flash still lingered in her mind. And it was coupled with a chill that had crawled up her spine, the aftereffect of the touch of a very tangible presence.

…

It was cool and quiet in the ninth-floor hallway as Kinchil pushed open the door. He rolled in the metal food cart with an expert's fluidity, whistling to himself as he rounded the corner towards the high-security cells. It was a peaceful morning for a change; there was no whooping or hollering, no fights in the lower cells, or fireballs being shot at walls. The mayhem of his first month on the job had gradually faded for the menial, and much more comforting rhythm of task lists.

Kinchil tackled each cell in turn, gradually coming to Cell 137. Commander Deng was sitting in his
cage, all healed up, a bright-yellow flame lit in his palm. Ever since the Azulon incident he had grown more cranky and contemplative, and towards the end of calendar autumn he had spent more time sleeping than talking. Now he sat with his elbow on his knee, chin on his fist, staring into space with a profoundly bored expression.

"Hm… I see… And how long have you been living without a face? Interesting…Yes, I empathize with the fact that it makes life difficult. Have you tried asking Koh to give it back? No, I have never spoken with him before, I have no idea how he would take such a request, but I presume that it's worth it at least to attempt… No, I will not ask him for you! I have matters of my own to attend to here! My fleet is currently sailing through doldrums and I must divine the flow of the tides so that I can coordinate our escape… What? No, the word is fleet! F-L-E-E-T! A command of ships! Oh, for Agni's sake, those big metal things that humans use to travel across water!" There was a pause, then Deng's shoulders sank and a despairing look fell over his face. "Yes, the big floating bananas… What?! No, we do not harvest them from trees! Oh, Sacred Flame of Ra… That's it, I have to be on my way now. Goodbye."

He hastened to stir the bones in his palm, making the flame dim ever so slightly before it brightened back to yellow.

"Dragon-bird, I am severing the line now… wait, what? Wolf Spirit? You again? Don't you usually roam around the other side of the swamp-forest?... Then how did I end up here?... No, I will have you know it is not my fault – some harmonic motion in the realm is causing me to lose grip on my location and drift off into random territories. Believe me, I've been in the swamp-forest enough! I'll be going now. No, I do not know what is causing the motion! Good day!"

Deng scowled and stirred the bones some more, evidently in an effort to cut the line. But no matter how he tried to turn the flame red, it would keep brightening to yellow seemingly of its own accord. Finally he clapped his hand over it and put it out.

Deng tossed the burnt bones aside and sat in the darkness for a moment. He adjusted the tie of his blanket-cape and turned around, finally peering out of his cage just as Kinchil knelt down with the breakfast tray.

"No one good today, huh?" Kinchil said.

Commander Deng spat to the side. "Nothing. Not a single intelligent conversation."

Kinchil did a double-take. He hadn't expected Deng to reply, but was even more surprised at how clear and calm the man's voice sounded. "So… who did you talk to, then?" he ventured.

"A bunch of random passersby yearning for attention. Just now it was some idiot curly-tailed blue-nose monkey who got his face stolen by Koh. Apparently he got lost and wandered into his cave by accident." Commander Deng rolled his eyes. He leaned against the nearby wall and lay his hands over his stomach. "I will take the food now."

Kinchil set down the tray beside him. Commander Deng scooted over to it and began to eat, not with his usual frantic pace, but this time neatly and almost normally.

"So… how do you do that, anyway?" Kinchil asked.

"Do what?"

"That fire trick."

Deng scrunched up his face into a frown. "What fire trick? Lighting a flame?" He made a flame from
his palm, this one a basic red.

"No, I mean the talking to spirits thing. If that's what you're doing."

Deng blinked now, looking puzzled. "Of course I'm talking to spirits. Also to people who have settled in the spirit world after departing this one. And it has nothing to do with fire – fire is simply the forger of the connection between me and them."

"Why do you need the bones, then?"

"Because bones contain chi, left over from the animal's life. They have tendrils of connection to the animal's departed spirit, and by sending my chi through them, for example by firebending, I can ride those connections towards the rift and cross it. Plants can technically be used to the same effect, but they burn out too quickly and the chi in them escapes. That's why I prefer bones." He leaned back over his plate and kept eating.

Not knowing if he himself was stupid or if Deng was just speaking tongues, Kinchil spoke up. "What's the rift?"

"The rift between the two worlds," Deng replied. When Kinchil said nothing, he lifted an eyebrow as if talking to someone very dense. "The rift that separates the spirit world from the physical world?"

Kinchil shook his head. "I've never heard of that."

Deng scowled and looked up to study him more fully. "What is it you deckhands do in your free time? Do you really just sit in the galley all day and talk about origami? Has nothing you've experienced on any of your voyages even slightly caused you to be interested in the way the world around you works?"

Kinchil found himself placing his hands against his chest in self-defense. "But I am interested! I'm asking you!"

"That's Commander to you, boy!"

Kinchil flinched, taken off-guard by the strict gleam in the man's eye. He clasped his hands together as deferentially as he could and inclined his head. "Commander. Please, tell me about the spirit world."

Deng breathed a long sigh, eyes rolling up to the ceiling now in annoyance. "How do you think it's possible that two realms governed by such different laws are able to interact with each other without destroying each other? Why is it that whenever a spirit materializes here, our whole world doesn't immediately get annihilated by some supernatural explosion? Or do you think our worlds just hover next to each other like little soap bubbles?"

Kinchil shook his head. "Uh… no, Commander."

"Correct. Because the two worlds are immersed in a common space of both matter and energy known as the rift. The rift is what separates the two realms in essence, while also providing a medium through which beings from either one may cross over into the other. And it is watched over by the guardian spirit, Lia."

"The Dragon-bird spirit?"

"No, the Dragon-bird spirit is an acquaintance of mine who meets me at the rift and guides me
though the spirit world. I still don’t know all of its ins and outs, so her help is an unquestionable asset. Lia is the guardian of the rift itself. It's her job to make sure the rift stays within its natural threshold of density and that the two realms do not become dangerously close to converging.

Kinchil processed this. "What would… happen if they did?"

"If they converged? A mess." Deng sucked a fish bone clean. "The spirit world is governed by pure energy, the physical world by material laws. Energy controls matter, so we’d be living in the spirits’ world essentially. So the rift must be there to maintain equilibrium. Still, whenever a being crosses from one realm to another, they create a temporary hole in it. You grasp a connection, like I've just explained, and you send your chi through it, like I do with firebending."

"Oh…" Kinchil tilted his head to the side, now tapping his chin in curiosity. "So, could you use the other elements too?"

"Of course. One can just as easily cross the rift using earth, air, or water. Water, in particular."

"Why water?"

Commander Deng glared at him again. "Haven't you been listening? The rift itself is water! The realms are immersed in it – the rift is like the sea and the two realms are like two warships that drift side-by-side at varying distances to keep from crashing into each other! The rift was created by the Moon and Ocean spirits when they forged the first bond by crossing over to the mortal world. Lia is their daughter and she was tasked with maintaining it. Then of course that bond was strengthened when the first human waterbenders began to watch the Moon and Ocean's behavior and learned how to synchronize the ebb and flow of their chi with the ebb and flow of the tides, while in the meantime firebenders learned from the dragons, earthbenders from badger-moles, and so on and so forth. The mechanics of that are much more complicated and I have no time to start going into detail now, so let it suffice to say that certain spirits forged the rift by making themselves mortal and humans strengthened it by connecting their chi with the original spiritual sources of bending." Deng downed a big gulp of his water. "That's your lesson for today. Maybe now instead of whiling away all your shifts staring blankly off into space, you'll actually start thinking about the world beyond the tip of your nose."

Kinchil leaned his elbows in his lap. He looked at his sundial watch, useless in the darkness, running his fingers over the glyphs that adorned the armband. "I always knew that bending came from something spiritual… I have an ancestor who was a shaman and we have a copy of a firebending scroll he wrote hundreds of years ago. He talked about how firebending was linked to breath and life… But I've never really learned anything about the spirit world."

Deng made a sound of conversational pity, still chewing his food.

"So why did you want to talk to them this time? Uh, Commander?"

Deng picked out another fish bone from his mouth and spat it away. "I had less say in the matter than I would have liked. I wanted to connect to Fire Sage Amaron to follow up on a debate we were having, but once I entered the spirits' realm, I found that my connection was far too strong. Usually when I search for one I can pass by the realms I do not want. But now, during the solstice, my presence is so anchored wherever I go that my arrival ends up being sensed by every single bored sorry soul in the vicinity. At this rate, I'll probably be noticed by Koh himself…"

He sank into a pondering silence. He turned his attention back to the pile of burnt bones and ignited them again on the floor. This flame too turned yellow, and he looked at it for a long time.
"What I do not understand is what that storm meant… The Badger Spirit said that there was a brief surge of energy surrounding some sort of meadow. But I've never seen a meadow anywhere in the Spirit World before. At least not like he described…" He scratched his head.

Kinchil sat there for a while longer, but it seemed that Commander Deng's brief period of lucidity was beginning to wane. He was staring into the flame, his gaze growing glassy and distant.

"Uh… Don't forget to eat this time," Kinchil said.

Commander Deng waved a hand at him in dismissal. "Go, go! I'm busy."

The next morning, Azula woke up in her bedroom, opening her eyes to see her room brightly-lit. It wasn't Isla washing her hands by the sink this time, but Mira. The nurse's short hair swished around her shoulders as she turned around with the breakfast tray. Azula merely looked back at her.

"Where's Isla?"

"She's sick." Mira placed the tray onto Azula's lap and added the bottle of serum. "Come on, you don't want to be late for physical therapy."

She started to walk away, but Azula grabbed her sleeve. "Why isn't she here? Tell me where she is!"

Mira pried Azula's hand away. "I just told you, she's sick. She needs to be alone for a few days."

Azula's heart began to hammer again. "I don't believe you!" she said. "The assassin took her! He's trying to get at me, so now he's going to abduct you one by one and squeeze the information out of you! He wants me dead!"

Mira's eyes bulged in horror. "Assassin?! What in the world are you talking about?"

"The assassin!" Azula jerked forward. "The assassin who was in the forest! I saw him yesterday!"

She started to point towards the window but Mira caught her wrist. "Okay, calm down! Stop!" She lowered Azula's arm. "What are you talking about? Why would there be an assassin here?"

"He's here for me!" Azula shouted. "He took Isla! Now he's going to take the rest of you!" She started to lift her arms again and Mira pushed her back. The more she tried to steady Azula by the shoulders, the more Azula fought to break free of her grip, until it looked like Azula was convulsing from some sort of seizure.

Moments later Nira and Kira ran inside.

"What's going on? What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing! Let go of me!" Azula broke free of Mira's grip. She tossed the blanket aside and vaulted over the side of the bed, falling into the floor. She scrambled to her feet and got into a fighting stance.

The nurses instantly tensed. Nira stepped forward, lifting her hands. "Stop! We know what you're about to do!"

Azula jumped back onto the bed and hopped over the other side. But the three nurses rushed after her, drawing her back towards the window.

Azula held up her fists and snarled. "Get out of my way!" she shouted. "Now, or I'll knock out all
three of you!"

"Call Dr. Low," Mira said.

Nira ran off. Mira and Kira moved to fill her vacant space, inching towards Azula with their hands held up protectively in front of them.

"Azula, we don't want to hurt you," Kira said. "Just get into the wheelchair and everything will be all right."

"No!" Azula shouted. "Everything is not going to be all right! All of you stupid klutzes are going to get kidnapped and I'll be the only one left!"

Kira continued to advance on her, Mira pulling the wheelchair from behind. In a swift motion, Kira lunged. Azula barely had time to dive aside before the nurse grabbed hold of her arm, and she twisted and kicked in an attempt to break free. Mira took her by the shoulders, trying to force her into the chair, and Azula began to scream, flailing and butting her head like a raging bull-rhino.

There was a rush of footsteps as Dr. Low entered the room, Nira and Dee behind him.

Azula's gaze darted towards him, and she lunged free of Mira and Kira's grip. "What happened to Isla?" she shouted. "She's gone, isn't she? They took her!"

Dr. Low steadied her by the shoulders. "Azula, calm down. Isla isn't gone. I spoke to her hardly a minute ago. She's in bed with a bad headache and needs rest."

"You can't fool me! Nurses don't get sick!"

Dr. Low sighed. He motioned Mira and Kira away and guided Azula to her bed himself. "No regimen today," he said to them. "These past few weeks must have gotten to her head. We were too quick with the second stage."

The nurses stood in silence, then one by one, they left. Dr. Low motioned Azula towards the bed and waited for her to climb in. Once they were alone, he pulled up a chair beside her and crossed his arms.

"All right, Azula. Tell me everything that's going on and where this fear of yours came from."

Azula pushed herself up into a seated position. "I saw someone in the woods near the back." She jabbed her finger in the direction of the far door. "Out by the back of the building there was this small forest, and Isla was pushing my wheelchair by it and I saw someone in the shadows. I told her to stop and look, but she didn't believe me. She said she didn't see anyone. But I did!"

"Did you see anything in particular, or was it just a shadow?"

Azula pressed her lips together, thinking back. "Just a shadow… But it was definitely a person. They were wearing red robes and they were peeking out from the trees."

"Did they do anything else?"

"No. But I felt like they were watching me. First I saw their sleeve, then when I turned to look at them I saw their robe! If it were a hallucination, they would have been gone when I looked back, right? But they were there!"

Dr. Low cast his gaze off to the side, expression clouding. "I was afraid of this… I knew I should
have told Isla to take you inside immediately. This is my fault, again."

"No!" Azula gripped the bar of the bed in horror. "No, no, no! It wasn't a mistake, I saw them with my own two eyes! Why doesn't anyone believe me?" She clenched her jaws, and for a startling moment, she felt a bitter heat rise to her face. Her vision blurred and trembled as tears began to spill from her eyes. "I hate you!" she rasped. "I hate you, you don't know what you're doing, you don't care that there's an assassin out there who's trying to kill me! That's probably exactly what Zuko wants. He wants me locked up in some crazy shack with idiot staff who won't give a gopher-bear's tail if I'm murdered!"

Dr. Low leaned closer and put a hand on the bar. "Azula, that isn't true. You're completely safe. There is nobody on this island except for us and you, and there is no way anybody else could get here from the mainland unless they boarded a cargo ship or swam fifty miles through freezing water. The first option is impossible because those ships are checked at their home port, several times during the voyage, and again before stopping here. The second option, well, you figure out for yourself."

"It could have been a waterbender!" Azula said. "Or an airben… I mean, the Avatar come to finish me off!"

Dr. Low shook his head. "Even if it were, they would have to know first of all where this island is, and second of all that you are even being kept here. I assure you that besides us, the only other person who knows your location is your mother."

Azula's face froze. A chill crept up her spine, so strong that it must have made the hairs on her head stand on edge, like sea-snakes. "What?"

Dr. Low frowned. "I said, the only person who knows your location besides us is your brother."

"Oh." Right then, Azula realized she was gripping the bar of the bed so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. She hastened to loosen her grip, but Dr. Low had already noticed. He fixed his gaze on her.

"Something is bothering you, Azula. And you're not telling me what it is."

"I'm telling you everything!" Azula said.

Dr. Low sighed. She knew he didn't believe her, and that she wasn't doing a good job of convincing him. But nevertheless, he switched the subject.

"Have you ever had similar experiences before?"

"Similar to what?"

"Seeing things that scared or upset you."

Yes. You saw your mother standing behind you in the mirror.

Azula wavered for a moment, then held fast. "No."

Dr. Low rubbed his forehead. "The reason I'm asking is that I've had a fair number of patients come to me in the past for hallucinations. According to their reports, their visions peaked around certain times of the year, this being one of them. It's currently the second day of December, which means there are only a couple weeks left till the winter solstice."

"So?"
"Well, the solstices are generally very tumultuous times in nature. Human beings are a part of nature, even though our industrial cities and towering metal ships can make us think otherwise, and we're not immune to the changes that go on in the natural cycle. It could very well be a common seasonal thing affecting you. Though, with your emotional instability, a simple disposition could manifest itself into something that appears to be a crisis."

"But why the solstice?"

"There are theories. Some say that it's because the spirit world and the physical world come closer to converging. Now, I'm not a specialist on the supernatural, I deal with the concrete, and personally I think that those explanations don't get to the root of the problem. When a person's hallucinations cause them pain and grief, it's because there's a preexisting problem within them that's triggering the pain. I'm trying to find out what that problem is for you."

Azula lowered her gaze. "I'm upset because there's an assassin!"

"Well, for reasons already discussed, that fear is unfounded." Dr. Low rose from his seat. "I'll leave you alone now. Try to relax. Forget about the regimen, forget about your exercises, and get as much rest as you can. I'll have the night crew sweep the island just in case." He closed the shutters and left, closing the door behind him.

Azula sat there for almost an hour, straining her ears. Beyond her door she heard only sporadic footfalls and muffled conversation. Some people had gone outside, the light of their flames faintly visible from the shutters, but the minutes stretched and they didn't seem to be finding anything. Azula clenched her jaw and tightened her grip around the blanket, hearing only the beating of her heart.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

At one point her door opened and Kira poked her head in.

"We checked the island, Azula. There's no one here."

Azula gave no response. She turned away and pretended to read a scroll, but when the nurse left she looked back up at the window, frustration and foreboding churning inside her.

Night fell. Azula sat alone in the mind therapy room with a Pai Sho set in front of her. The room and hallway were dark, only a solitary light shining down above the empty teacher's desk. Azula hated the darkness, but for some reason her mind kept refusing her urges to do something about it. Her body kept itself glued to the chair, her hands in a permanent cycle of placing down tiles one after the other and moving them. All the while there was a dark hallway just outside her door, and a deserted hospital building surrounding her, for the nurses and Dr. Low had all gone home.

But no, she wasn't alone. The building was alive again – in fact, it had been alive the whole time; she had just allowed other things to take her mind off of it. But now the giant beast had stirred. And she was sitting in its jaws, being watched.

Azula did her best to focus her mind on the tiles. She was trying to remember the rules for Solo-Sho, moving the pieces back and forth in an attempt to reconstruct the patterns. Then suddenly, there came a rush of cold air.

Azula looked up to see a thick gray mist flow into the room, gathering into a cloud in front of the teacher's desk. The mist condensed and materialized into a figure. A face appeared, as did long brown hair and draping red robes, and in a matter of moments Azula found herself face-to-face with
"Hello Azula."

Azula froze in her chair. For a frightening moment she couldn't move or breathe. All she could do was lean back, pushing herself as far away from the woman as the tiny desk would allow. "It was you," she said. Then, louder: "How did you get in here?"

Ursa gave a nonchalant shrug. "It wasn't hard. I just followed one of those nurses of yours through the door. Poor silly girl didn't even notice."

Azula snarled. "What are you doing here?"

"I didn't want to miss my own daughter's hospitalization." Ursa's lips curved up in a smile.

By now Azula's frantically pounding heart had retreated into the background as her thoughts became colored with their familiar scorn and annoyance. "Well, unfortunately you're a bit late to the party. I've been here for three months already. Or did it take you that long to swim across the sea?"

"I didn't swim, you silly cat-rabbit, I flew," Ursa replied. "On the Avatar's sky bison. We're great friends." She gave a sentimental smile, which was at the same time subtly venomous. Azula gripped the edges of her chair and gritted her teeth in rage.

"You made a big mistake coming here. You've isolated yourself in a locked building with a master firebender. And you're defenseless."

She glared at Ursa as darkly as she could muster. But for some reason the darkness Azula summoned up was just barely managing to contend with the darkness that emanated from the figure, from her.

Ursa took in her words like a pretty poem, smiling. She sauntered closer. "Oh, but am I?"

She continued to advance towards Azula's desk until she was leaning over it. The cloud of cold air that surrounded her enveloped Azula as well, and before she could do anything, one of Ursa's claw-like hands gripped her under the chin and tilted up her face. She was left to look into her mother's eyes, light amber and slightly narrowed in detached pity. Their gaze traced her jagged fringe of hair.

"A shame… You always had such beautiful hair. I was certain you were going to be the perfect daughter. Patient, kind, obedient… But no, you turned out to be something I would never want in any family. Instead of a daughter, I got a monster. A little young blue-fired dragon."

She dropped Azula's chin with a resigned sigh and stepped away.

Rage and hurt flared up inside Azula as she bored her stare into her mother's back. "You're right," Azula said. "I am a dragon. And not the kind that loves like in your stupid play." She stole a glance at the candle on the table, which was casting a shadow on a sundial. The hour of the serum's dosage had passed.

Energy stirred within her, and in a snap, Azula shot out of the chair and punched a blast of blue fire into the air. Ursa whirled around and disappeared right when the flames hit.

Azula left the room, hands poised in her lightningbending form, scanning the hallway through narrowed eyes.

A second later, the red glimmer reappeared before the back door. Azula's gaze darted to the spot just as Ursa slipped outside, and she ran after her. Azula stumbled through the open door into a cool,
damp night. The full moon beamed brightly overhead, casting a glow over the sea and the thick grass that had appeared all over the shore.

Ursa kept running away, and Azula saw that the thin collection of trees that she had taken to be the island's only wildlife was actually a forest of hundreds — thick, enormous and green with nothing but shadows in their depths. Ursa ran towards them, then just before going through she turned back to Azula and gave a wink.

Her heart hammering, Azula drove in. She jumped over bushes and slapped away branches with her hands, no longer aware of where she was going. At long last a glow of light appeared ahead and she stumbled out into a clearing.

She gasped.

A huge lake lay out before her in the moonlight. It was perfectly round, the water's surface flat and glassy blue.

"Azula..." came a voice. It was emanating from the water itself, somewhere beneath the surface.

Azula gulped. She tentatively approached the lake and knelt down. Her breaths became terrified, her eyes widened, and her voice grew squeaky and choked like a child's.

"Quin…?" she bit out.

But it wasn't Quin. A flash of red appeared on the water again, just like it had in the meadow. Azula leaned over it, but instead of her reflection, she saw the face of Ursa. Her mother's eyes looked straight into her own, her expression now frozen and mask-like.

"Azula… I'm right here… Come to me…"

Azula gritted her teeth.

No.

She stumbled back, rising to her feet, feeling rage and hurt swell up again inside her. "NO!"

She shot a beam of lightning at the reflection, and the lake exploded. The light from her attack shot upwards in a brilliant burst, the droplets of water turning into hundreds of shards of glass that cut through her skin and tore her to shreds...

Azula shot up from her bed with a scream. Red stars danced across her vision, and moments after they cleared, she came to her senses. She was in her bedroom.

There was a clamor of footsteps and Nira burst inside. She flicked on the lights. "Azula! What's wrong? What happened?"

Azula blinked several times. She shook her head. "Nothing… It was a dream."

Nira sank against the doorframe in relief. "Oh, thank goodness! You sounded like you were getting eaten alive!"

"Yeah, that's exactly what was happening!"

The young nurse tilted her head and tapped her chin. "Hm. I wonder why that happened. Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?"
Azula felt a customary flare of annoyance. "I don't know!"

But beneath that her heart was still beating, and the sound of her calmed breaths was creating a subtle swell of relief inside of her. The relief of simply existing.

The silence stretched, and after a few moments Nira pursed her lips. "Do you want anything? A glass of water, maybe?"

Azula shook her head. "I'm fine. I'm going to sleep." She settled back into bed and pulled the blanket over herself.

"Well, all right, if you're sure…" Nira stepped back towards the door and turned off the lights. "Sleep tight!" The door closed with a quiet thud.

Azula lay there for what felt like an eternity, staring up at the ceiling.
The Light

A few days later, Isla came back. She burst in as Azula was finishing her breakfast, looking normal, if a bit disheveled. She walked about halfway towards the bed before slowing to a stop, one hand nervously clutching her skirt.

"I'm sorry, Azula."

Azula looked at her through narrowed eyes, feeling a mix of bitterness, relief, and residual anxiousness swell up inside her. The corners of her mouth twitched down, and after a moment she looked away.

Not another word passed between them. Gradually the both of them settled back into their normal states of being, Isla placid as she helped Azula through her morning routine and rolled over her wheelchair. Azula reclined in it with an apathetic expression and allowed herself to be escorted to the physical therapy room.

The night crew hadn't found anyone on the island, and Azula hadn't had the dream of Ursa a second time. By unspoken agreement, the matter was put to rest. But in the days that had followed, she had been put on a strict regimen of recovery, which involved meditation exercises with Dee and lots of quiet time in her room. Azula was fairly certain who had given the order.

After finishing with physical therapy, she spent the remainder of the morning in the craft room, playing a solitary card game at the student's desk. The blackboard at the front was now covered by a large world map, where Kira had put a pin on their spot near the Fire Nation, a sort of peace offering. Azula was sitting alone, grouping cards in various orders, when the door opened and Dr. Low walked in. He was carrying a tray with two teacups. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Azula looked up at him, then lowered her gaze again with a grumble. "I guess." She flipped another card.

Dr. Low approached her, smiling slightly. "Not going to jump to conclusions anymore?"

Azula slammed down the deck. "I was scared, okay? You try walking by pitch dark woods where you can't fight and there could be anything going on for all you know!"

Dr. Low chuckled. "To be fair, they weren't really woods, nor was it nighttime. But I'm sure anybody in your situation would have been frightened. In fact, I had hoped you would see that the thoughts induced by your panic reaction didn't correspond to reality. Lest you leave yourself and everyone else around you beside themselves with worry like you did."

Azula felt an involuntary scowl pass over her face. "What, so you're mad at me? Well, sorry for being such a monster and overreacting at everything!" She turned her head away from him, crossing her arms.

Dr. Low stepped closer. "Having feelings doesn't make you a monster. It makes you human." He set down one of the teacups in front of her. "And I'm in no way mad at you, nor was I ever. In fact, I was concerned about Isla as well. She's one of those people I told you about earlier, who get sensitive to changes of season."

Azula frowned. "How do you know?"
"We've known each other for a long time. She helps me make medicine back at my clinic."

Azula glanced down at the teacup, finally looping her fingers through the handle to take a sip. Dr. Low took a seat at a chair to the side and drank from his as well. She watched him for some uneventful moments, then frowned anew in puzzlement. "So you've really never been mad at me?"

Dr. Low shook his head in earnest. "Never."

"Not even after I almost shot lightning at you?"

An unexpected smile tugged at his mouth. "Well, it did surprise me. The thought had never crossed my mind that you'd find a way to outsmart the serum dosage. But no, I wasn't mad at you for it. I was merely concerned about you and wanted to find out why you had reacted that way."

Azula scrunched up her face into an incredulous expression, but in truth she didn't know what she wanted to say in response. She settled into a passive silence and went back to arranging her cards, though her mind wasn't so much on the game anymore as it was on him. After a moment she looked at him anew and squinted. "Are you ever mad at anyone, then? Or are you not allowed to be because you're a doctor?"

Dr. Low chuckled. "Oh, I've been angry with people, certainly. I have feelings too, after all."

"Who've you been mad at, then?"

Dr. Low strummed his fingers against the arm of the chair. "Well, let's see... I've been angry with the head of my division, back when I was in the military. He was somewhat of a careerist. Not to say that it's shameful to see service as a career per se, but more often than not I've observed that it leads people to act selfishly."

Azula leaned her chin in her hand. "So you were mad at him because he was selfish?"

"That's the gist of it." Dr. Low took a sip of his tea. "I was transferred to him in my seventh year. He needed a surgeon, and I had a good track record. Spent two years with him. Unfortunately many of the injuries I treated weren't even battle injuries – he'd work his men so hard that they'd injure themselves. And he'd punish them, make them go without food for something silly like not having their boots changed in five seconds. When it came to battle, though, he just saw us as stepping stones towards bettering his prospects. From what I gathered, his plan was to have some successful campaigns, land a nice cozy place in a general's advisory staff somewhere, and be rid of us."

Azula nodded. "Yeah, there are a lot of people like that." Her gaze drifted off to the side and she found a wistful smile tug at her mouth. "Dad always used to say that those are the easiest people to count on, because you know their motivations for working for you. But you can't let them too close to you, or they could stab you in the back." The smile faded and she sighed.

Dr. Low nodded along. "Unfortunately, we were stuck with him... But that wasn't the worst of it. The men who served under him had figured him out over time. They knew how to get by..."

"How?"

"Well, it was a lot of underhanded teamwork. They'd help each other organize their supplies and checked each other before going out into formation. There was one lieutenant who was on the captain's good side, so he could tell us when he was in a good mood and when he wasn't. He even attributed the captain's pettiness to the lack of action, since during that whole first year we were on the move, and he really only had us to fight with." Dr. Low gave a laugh. Then at the end it morphed into sigh and he began to stir his tea. "Well, then during our second winter he finally got an order.
We had to occupy a town in the Guanxi Province. Azulon had just begun his great winter campaign, you probably know all about it."

"Yeah."

"Our division was sent north, towards the town of Bei Shan. But there were blizzards everywhere and we had to stop someplace to wait it out. We ended up coming by a village, which unfortunately was stricken by a plague at the time - it was some disease that triggered a high fever and coughing with blood. Three other towns in the area had it too. People were lying in their beds motionless, and those who were still on their feet could suddenly keel over and never get back up. In just a few months over a quarter of their people had died. The builders had stopped trying to patch up roofs and switched to making burial sites. And nearly all the men were off fighting a war, so all that was left were elderly, women, and children."

Azula listened with her eyes wide, whether from shock or disgust or disbelief she didn't know. Her fingers gradually slackened around the handle of her teacup.

Dr. Low continued to stare down at his. "By the time we found out what was going on, of course, it was too late to leave. The blizzard was becoming too intense, and if we went out, we'd freeze to death. Fortunately the townspeople had figured out a way to quarantine the sick – they walled off a whole half of the town and sent people there when they got symptoms. They boiled their water and buried the dead in the ground. I suggested they burn the bodies, otherwise there was a chance the disease would accumulate. But it was against their custom, and you can imagine they weren't too willing to listen to a firebender of all people telling them how to take care of their dead. It took me a good while to convince them. Then I had them show me the quarantine zone."

Azula blinked. "You went in there?!" She bit back the Are you crazy, just before it slipped out.

Dr. Low gave a faint smile. "That's how they looked at me too. They said that most of their doctors didn't even go into the compound anymore. But I'd been around my fair share of contagious people, even in the Earth Kingdom, so I wasn't too worried. I met a woman there, a young mother - she was staying with her infant son in one of the houses. The boy was sick but she wasn't. I could touch his forehead and feel the fever inside him – it was radiating all throughout his body and it was concentrated in his lungs and skin, where I guessed the infection was. But when I touched hers, I didn't feel anything."

"How's that possible?"

"I figured she was naturally immune. She had said there were other people in the town who hadn't gotten sick for all that time either. If you dig into the history of any plague, really, you'll always be able to find stories of people who weren't affected by it, or not as strongly. There was a doctor named Shen Qua during Sozin's time who did research as to whether that could be used to help the people who do get sick. But the Earth Kingdom town's medicine wasn't advanced at all – they had no idea for what to do other than use the same blanket remedies they used for everything. They were hoping on a medicine caravan, because rumor had it that another town farther north had had some success with some herbal mixtures. But the caravan hadn't shown up for weeks after their promised date. Likely it got lost in the snow."

"Wow."

"Fortunately I had some of Shen Qua's work with me for the field, and I did some more house visits and asking around. Eventually I got a hunch for what to do. I suggested to the town heads that we gather up the people who had remained healthy and use some of their blood to develop an inoculation."
Azula tilted her head to the side. "A what?"

"An inoculation," Dr. Low repeated. He rubbed his forehead. "It's a fairly fringe concept, but the idea is that a disease invades the healthy person as well, only that person's body is able to fight it off without suffering deadly complications. In the past, doctors thought that this had something to do with a body's chi configuration, but Shen Qua showed that it actually had a more physical reason, namely a substance in a person's blood. So theoretically, if you isolate that substance, you can transfer the defense mechanism to someone else's blood too."

Azula blinked several times. "Whooa."

Dr. Low nodded. "But it's a complicated process… in order to get something from someone's blood, you have to have to determine their blood type, and for that you need to do tests…"

"Wait, blood type?"

"Yes, each individual has a certain blood type. Shen Qua discovered roughly four in all. It doesn't make much of a difference for regular treatments, but the rule is that your body is designed only to accept substances similar to its own. That's why it's dangerous to administer foreign blood to a patient if your patient's blood type doesn't match it. For my plan to work I'd have to test nearly the whole town, which would have been very hard. Doable, but hard. I'd have to get the help of other Fire Nation healers in nearby towns, and much more supplies than I had with me."

Dr. Low sighed. "And to do all that I needed the captain's approval. You can imagine what his attitude was. Here we were, in the middle of a winter that could just as well kill us all if the plague didn't, but he had no notion of cooperation with the townspeople, not even on grounds of pragmatism. He expected them to cater to his every whim, and he certainly wasn't about to expend his troops and resources and risk delaying his itinerary on their behalf. Never mind that the townspeople had already been struggling to feed themselves before we came, no. I told him I wanted to help them cure their sick and that I'd need to send a hawk to the nearest division. But he refused and threatened to report me to the general in charge."

Azula frowned in puzzlement. "You didn't just fight a duel?"

Dr. Low laughed. "An Agni Kai would've been pointless. He couldn't afford to kill or cripple me, just as much as he couldn't afford to be killed or crippled himself. So he said it was either a tribunal or he'd purge me. I said I'd go to the military tribunal with him right then if he wanted, and he took me up on the offer. He hauled me right over to the next town where our presiding general was. Thankfully the general was of the opinion that it's not a good idea to promote violence and negligence against innocent civilians, especially if we wanted to be bringing them – as they say it – good things in the end." He gulped down the rest of his tea. "He gave me an escort to the division near the other Earth Kingdom town so that I could get blood samples from them, and a vial of that herbal medicine. He said I could come back to the village once the blizzards died down. Towards spring I did. Over two months late, because of Captain Zhang, but I made it. The plague was already starting to ebb, but I ended up saving quite a few."

Azula twisted her hair around her finger. "Oh. Wow." She looked askance, gaze unfocused as the images of snow and sickness flickered through her mind. "Well, I mean, you got to help at least some of them. That's good, right?"

Dr. Low nodded in agreement. "It is. Though I would've saved a lot more if the captain hadn't intervened. Hence my anger at him."

Azula was silent for a few moments. "What about the mother and her kid?"
"They died," said Dr. Low grimly. "While I was gone. The boy from the fever, the mother from the cold. The townspeople buried them both together."

Azula stared at him. "Oh." She picked at one of her cards with her nail.

There was a silence, one that seemed more arid than the previous ones. Dr. Low's face too had grown somehow different, his gaze distant and contemplative. Azula hung in the limbo for a few moments, before it grew into a tangible discomfort and she hastened to patch it up.

"Is that… why you retired?"

Dr. Low blinked, and after a beat he shook his head. "Oh, no. Of course not. If anything, the way Captain Zhang acted made me even more determined to do what I could to lessen all the abrasion. Both amongst ourselves and with the people we were supposed to be fighting against. Then a year later I got transferred again, this time to a hospital in one of the Fire Nation outposts. I helped a lot of people coming back from Ba Sing Se. Well, then after that, my draft period ended and the command gave me the opportunity to retire. By then I'd decided to open a clinic of my own, so they honorably discharged me. I joined a division that was heading towards the southwestern Earth Kingdom and we sailed home."

"Oh."

He set his empty teacup aside. "Failure is no reason to quit, especially if you're a healer. In fact, for us it's pretty much a guarantee. There were plenty of people I couldn't help. And no matter what the circumstances are, it's always a personal blow to you."

Azula's eyebrows climbed. "Really?"

Dr. Low gave a nod. "Yes. There's one soldier you've finished tending to right when an earthbender makes the ground beneath you both collapse. The man falls into the pit and you happen to be the one left hanging on the edge for dear life. Other times you get to someone, but you end up not being quick enough. Or you act in time, you do everything right, and the patient still doesn't pull through. And you're left angry at yourself, asking yourself what you could have done differently."

"For how long?"

"Months. Years… Forever, really." He gave a dry laugh. "All of your old cases sort of stow themselves away in your memory, whether they lasted one minute or one month. You might not always think about them, but they're there. And whenever you see a similar situation you're reminded of the old one. Especially if the old one wasn't a success."

Azula furrowed her brow. "So you never forget them?"

"Never."

"And you never stop hating yourself if you made a mistake?"

"Nope."

Azula blinked her eyes several times. In her bewilderment she shook her head. "Then what do you do?!"

Dr. Low shrugged. "You understand." He looked off to the side. "You mourn, you reflect, and you try to do better next time."
"But the bad memories don't even fade for you or anything?"

Dr. Low gave a hollow smile. "No. They never do."

...

The weeks crept on, and the solstice came. The daylight hours slipped by insignificantly, the sun peering out from the windows throughout, occupying ever-lower points on its path across the sky. At last, darkness fell. Azula was gripped by a strange disquiet through the hours, but she kept her mouth shut, merely trying to postpone her bedtime for as long as she could. She lied about not being tired, asked for snacks, forced Kira to play rounds of card games with her until the nurse finally clapped the deck closed in exasperation and ordered her to go sleep.

Azula lay in bed once Kira had extinguished the lamp, trying to keep her eyes open in the dark. But inevitably, sleep took her in.

Her dreams were jumbled and anxious. Blizzards sweeping through towns, caravans and soldiers lost in the whiteout… Being fine one moment then suddenly feeling the sickness creep up from within, the heat of fever washing over her and awakening every muscle and joint of her body to its impending doom. Lying on a ratty bed while it slowly killed her, an enemy she couldn't see or touch, one she couldn't even choose whether to fight or not. She could only wait like everyone else around her who dropped to the floor like dolls, wait while her heartbeat too ticked down its final hours. Wait for a doctor who couldn't help, because he wasn't her, because he could only fight the enemy from outside.

Then at one point, there came a moment of lucidity. Azula found herself back in her bedroom, sitting up. Everything dark, save for a round full moon shining out from her window and casting a silvery glow on the cabinets and shelves. She got up from her bed and approached the vanity mirror. The face of Ursa peered back out at her. Without a word, Ursa reached through the glass and pulled her in. Azula screamed, feeling her stomach lurch as her body plunged into the barrier and tumbled through darkness. At last her surroundings blinked back into focus and she felt herself land on solid ground.

Azula rubbed her eyes and looked up. She was back on the shore of the hospital island. Here the sun was shining, the familiar green grass growing all over the shore. Only now the lake that had been deep in the forest before was right there in the open, just a short walk away.

Ursa appeared beside her moments later, and without a word she strode off towards the lake. Azula stood up and started after her in a mechanical walk, unable to do anything about it.

They reached the water's edge together, where they stood side-by-side, looking down. Ursa's expression was placid, her posture still bearing remnants of its former haughtiness.

At last, Azula regained enough control over her body and turned to face her. "Why did you bring me here?"

"To make you see," Ursa replied.

Azula gritted her teeth. She took a few steps back and punched a flame at her, but the figure vanished in a puff of smoke. Moments later the surface of the lake shimmered and Ursa appeared again, rising up from the center. Only this time she was different - her face was no longer a condescending smirk, but the frozen, horrified mask Azula had seen beneath the water in the meadow. And her body floated over the water's surface like an apparition, her hair and robes billowing oddly, as if she were submerged.
"Azula…"

Azula staggered back and punched two more fire blasts into the air. The flames soared in twin arcs and struck Ursa simultaneously, engulfing her in a burst of blue fire. The water beneath her frothed and lapped away from the blast point. But it did nothing - the flames cleared to reveal her the same as before, her face pale, her eyes wide and sunken.

Ursa spoke again in the same hollow voice. "Help me."

For a second the words made Azula pause in puzzlement. But then her mind retaliated again, a reflexive flare of rage rising up and overriding her thoughts. Gritting her teeth, Azula arced her fingers through the air and shot a bolt of lightning. It zigzagged through the air and plunged into the water, making it surge up and turn into mist. The white haze thickened and expanded, obscuring the lake as well as the rest of Azula's surroundings. But Ursa was still there, hovering in place as before. Some of the mist came to twist around her form and she floated closer.

"Azua, my love… come to me…"

The mist that surrounded Ursa came to envelop Azula as well, the sudden chilly temperature bringing a shiver to her skin. Ursa's arms reached out, hands lifting weakly to grasp Azula's shoulders. Azula tried to writhe away, but she was too slow - Ursa latched onto her.

Panic shot through her veins. Her heart accelerated, and she flinched away from the gaze of those amber eyes, opening her mouth to scream.

But then it all disappeared in a wink, and she woke up.

The next day, the empty hospital hallway echoed with sounds of calm activity. Azula's feet tiptoed out of the craft room, slipping past slightly-ajar doors giving glimpses of meals and conversations, until she reached the one with the golden name plaque over it. She hesitated briefly, then finally tapped the palm of her hand against it. Dr. Low's voice rose up from inside.

"Come in."

Azula turned the doorknob and slowly pushed open the door. Dr. Low's office resembled that of a modest palace worker's, with red-accented walls and a large carpet. A healing dummy lay on a stretcher to the right, accompanied by wooden bookshelves as well as the landscape painting she had seen being brought in some weeks ago. In the other corner of the room was a writing desk, where Dr. Low sat in his regular doctor's smock, against the backdrop of a Fire Nation tapestry. He was having tea and reading a scroll. Seeing her, however, his eyebrows climbed and he put it down.

"Azula?"

Azula went the rest of the way in and closed the door. "Hi."

"Hello. I'm sorry, I was just reading some news from the mainland." He rolled up the scroll and set it aside. "Is something the matter?"

Azula swallowed, then spoke. "I know who I saw that day in the trees."

"Who?"

"It was my mother."
Dr. Low frowned. "Your mother?"

Azula nodded.

He gestured towards the vacant chair across from him. "Sit down."

Azula approached and took a seat. He cleared away the rest of his papers and the tea, leaving just the plain wood of the desk separating them. He folded his arms on the table.

"I had two dreams about her," Azula said. "One was after I saw her, and the other one was just last night. She said that she found me, and now she's not going to leave until she captures me."

Dr. Low looked at her steadily. "Tell me more about her."

Azula was silent.

"How was your relationship with her?"

Azula shrugged.

"Fine. Let's start with this. When was the last time you saw her?"

Azula lowered her gaze. "When I was nine."

Dr. Low's eyebrows climbed. "And what was happening?"

"She was yelling at me for being mean to Zuko."

"And then?"

"She disappeared." Azula looked at him blankly. "She turned and left down the hallway, and after that, I never saw her again." She clenched her jaw. "But now she found me here…"

Suddenly there came the sound of rushing air, and a wispy figure with faded colors materialized behind Dr. Low's shoulder. Azula gasped and began to pound the table with her hand. "Th–there she is! She's right behind you!"

Dr. Low frowned with noticeable disbelief. "Well isn't that convenient?"

"I mean it, she's there! Look!"

Azula kept jabbing her finger at the figure until Dr. Low finally gave in and looked over his shoulder. Ursa was standing there, face blank, her partially-translucent form revealing a bit of the wall behind her.

"Azula, I don't see–"

"Don't listen to what she says!" Azula snarled. "She's here to turn you all against me! She's here to take me down!" She sprang up from her seat and staggered back, waving her arms into a firebending pose. "I'll get her!"

She drew out the two forefingers of both hands, tracing her arms in an arc a few times until she felt a lazy, viscous stir of energy. "Yah!" Azula shot a hand forward, aiming to shoot the lightning bolt at Ursa's chest, but the only thing that came out from her fingertips was a flimsy spark. Ursa vanished in a puff of smoke and reappeared on Dr. Low's other side.
Azula snarled. "You can't run from me!" She repeated the motion and shot again, but this too only produced a spark that traveled a few inches forward before fizzing out. Ursa vanished again, this time reappearing by the bookshelves.

Azula turned to take her aim again, but right then, Dr. Low grabbed her arms from behind and clamped them to her sides. "That's enough."

Azula shook her head. "No! I was just about to get her, stop!"

She tried to twist free of his grip, but in vain. Dr. Low opened the door and walked her down the hallway, where he spotted her abandoned wheelchair in the craft room. He sat her down, fastening the arm and leg straps around her, and rolled her down the hallway. All the while Azula kept fidgeting, turning as far back around as the straps would allow.

"No!" she shouted. "Take me back! Take me back so I can face her! I'm sick of running away!"

Moments later a beat of footsteps caught up with them, and Kira appeared over her other shoulder. "Doctor! What happened?"

"She's delirious," Dr. Low replied. "She's seeing visions of her mother."

"Her mother?"

"Yes. She didn't tell me a lot about her, but she must be tied with some significant memories."

"She's here, I'm telling you!" Azula shouted. "And she told me how she got here! She said she got here on the Avatar's sky bison! Don't you see, it makes perfect sense! That's what you didn't take into consideration!"

"Azula, I think we would have noticed it if a ten-ton sky bison landed on the island," Dr. Low replied.

"No you wouldn't have! He landed in the trees! Check the ground, he sheds fur!"

Dr. Low sighed. He turned to Kira. "Let her rest for now, and when she calms down, continue with the regular routine. I'll come talk to her tomorrow. And give her another dose of serum."

Kira looked confused. "Serum? But we already gave her the morning dose."

"She just generated lightning twice. Her emotions must be causing a chi overflow."

"All right." Kira took the bars of the wheelchair and Azula swiveled back around to Dr. Low.

"No, don't!" she said. "I don't need rest, I need to face her, just please, just let me get rid of her!"

She bored her gaze into his, pleading with all her might. But Dr. Low merely shook his head and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Azula, relax. There is no one in my office, or in the hall, or anywhere. Kira's going to give you another dose of the serum, then you're going to bed. That's a prescription."

He began to walk away, and Kira wheeled her in the opposite direction, and soon the image of Azula's surroundings changed to the familiar interior of her bedroom.

"All right, missy, you're going to have some downtime." Kira pulled back the blankets and fluffed up the pillow.
She went back to get Azula's wheelchair, but just as she began to roll it closer to the bed, something gleamed in the corner of Azula's eye. Azula snapped her head to the spot, and found herself looking into the vanity mirror, where the light from the window was casting a reflection.

Her heart accelerated. "Aha! Now you're here too!" Azula lunged forward, forgetting that she was restrained and making the wheelchair jump. Kira's hands flew to the handlebars to steady it and she clamped her hands down on Azula's shoulders.

"Azula, calm down. Unless you want me to put you to bed in those restraining bands, show me that you can sit still."

"I'll sit still when she's gone!"

"Who?"

Azula jabbed her finger at the mirror, where Ursa's image had flickered yet again, the golden cuffs of her robe falling gracefully down the front. Kira's gaze trailed over to the spot, and she took several steps towards the mirror, glancing at it quizzically. "Who are you looking at? This is a mirror, Azula!"

"My mother's inside it!"

Kira cast her an exasperated glance. "Azula, your mind is clearly making things up."

"No it's not! She's there!"

Kira sighed and knocked on the glass with one hand. "Azula, this is a solid object. It's physically impossible for something to come out of it."

"Water's a solid object too, but things can come out of that, can't they?"

"Water is a **liquid**, Azula."

Azula gritted her teeth, fingers digging into the armrests of the chair. "That's not what I'm talking about! She's *there*! She's *in the mirror*, why don't you understand me?"

Kira slapped a hand to her forehead. She went to the mirror and lifted the whole thing up, turning it around so that it faced the wall. She set it down with a loud thump and dusted off her hands. "There. She's gone. Happy now?"

Azula crinkled her nose at the nurse's matter-of-fact gaze. She stared at the plain wooden board at the back of the mirror, then finally crossed her arms. "Hmph. Fine."

"Good. Now sleep." Kira unbuckled the wheelchair straps and helped Azula into the bed. Once she was under the covers, Kira gave her a spoonful of serum, closed the shutters, and left the room.

Azula lifted her head from the pillow ever so slightly, her gaze darting across the dimmed daytime surroundings. Reason was telling her that it was impossible, and yet her instinct was telling her different. Where before Ursa had been beneath the lake, now she could be anywhere – in the gleam of light reflecting off the metal bars of the wheelchair, in the metal handles of the cabinets, on the shiny tiled surface of the floor, all gleaming like the shards of the glassy water's surface she had shattered.

…
Later that afternoon, Ozai was lying on his side, tracing patterns on the floor with a chopstick splinter. There was a sandy patch near the back corner of his cell that was enough for a few characters, snippets of his mental dialogue with himself that he wrote down, then wiped clean to start anew. The other half of his attention was fixed on the hollers that were coming from the neighboring cell.

"Oh, for the last time, I WAS NOT – TRYING – TO – CONTACT – YOU! I AM TRYING – TO GET BACK – TO THE RIFT! GOODBYE!" Each word was punctuated by the clang of a tray being smashed against the wall. Commander Deng had been in a blind rage since midnight; it had abated for a few hours after the sound of a whump on the floor, leading to the morbid realization that the man had collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Then a few hours later he had picked up again, and the ordeal seemed to have worked him up more and more by the hour.

"Out of my way!" Deng shouted. "Out of my way, I said! Urgh, this cursed swamp-forest... Could you be any more extraneous here, you lumbering baboon spirit? No, I cannot give you directions! You're not the only one who's in a hurry!" Deng continued to growl and mumble, then finally he gave a cry of relief. "Dragon-bird! Thank the heavens, I found you! Could we please fly back to the rift now? Oh, the sooner this blasted solstice is over, the better… I don't remember the convergence ever being so strong before. No wonder everyone's fleeing from it!"

Ozai could more or less parse what the man was saying now. Some storm had passed, some rift had grown thin, and now the spirits were in chaos. They were fleeing from unstable points of some sort and migrating deeper into their own realm. Which was a problem for Deng because he had no sources of information as to what was causing the boundary to erode.

The other prisoners in the vicinity were shouting in complaint, their cries often supplemented by the roar of a fire blast. The entire floor had grown warm as a result, which was a decent compensation for the chilly air outside. But mostly Ozai paid attention to Deng's despairing wails, half pitying the man, half interested in what he was saying.

"All right, I see there's no other way to deal with these confused masses," Deng continued. "Dragon-bird, hold on just one moment, I will go the rest of the way to you--"

He abruptly went silent.

Ozai was perplexed. He tensed for the sound of Deng collapsing, but it didn't come.

Half an hour passed by like this, at which point Ozai's mind was drawing a complete blank for what to think. The other prisoners settled down one-by-one as well, and the floor plunged once again into silence.

Minutes later there was a distant slam of a door and the sound of the lunch cart approaching. The voices of the two young guards, Mo and Kinchil, rose up.

"Can't wait to get home, my mom made me soup…"

"Well, I've only got some scraps from yesterday to look forward to, I'll probably go out somewhere… Ah!" There was a clatter of paper as something fell out of the latter guard's pocket.

"Whoa, careful!"

"Don't worry, it's not a map," Kinchil replied. "It's just a star chart I was working on."

"Huh? Oh, it's that thing you had yesterday. What's it for?"
"I was just seeing how long it would be till the solstice," Kinchil replied. "You know, our modern calendar is a little off. We have twelve months, so there should be three per season. That leaves December, January, and February as winter. But the solstice is supposed to be the middle of winter. It's winter's extreme. So an astronomical calendar is a better predictor of the seasons than the standard one we have."

"Huh. I never thought about that before."

Kinchil's speech quickened. "And technically, the date for the new year is arbitrary. It doesn't have to be near the end of winter - the ancient people of the Fire Nation celebrated it in the summer. But then the Fire Lords changed it. So if they hadn't, then the seventh month would technically be the first month, and the eighth month the second month..."

"Hold on, Mr. Astrology, the food's getting cold."

The door to Deng's cell opened, then closed.

"That's weird," Mo murmured. "Why's he sitting still like that?"

"He must be meditating..." Kinchil replied.

"Well it beats the usual."

"Heh."

The cart rolled on.

"So how is it you tell time from that sundial thing anyway?"

"Oh, you just have to position yourself due north."

"But what if you don't know where north is?"

"Well, you have to know the landmarks. And if all else fails, judging by the sun is a good rough estimate."

"Come to think of it, it sounds like a pretty mean gift," Mo remarked. "It reminds me of how my aunt gave my cousin a super hard puzzle for his birthday. It's been a whole year and he's completely mad because he still hasn't figured it out."

Kinchil laughed. "Well, it wasn't like that, this was passed down through my family. My dad gave it to me when I moved out of Fire Fountain."

Right then, Ozai's door opened and a burst of light spilled in. Mo walked in, deposited the tray, and turned back around to Kinchil. "Still, you always have to go out of your way to position yourself just to tell the time! Doesn't that get annoying?"

Kinchil gave a smile and shrugged. "I don't know, I guess it just comes to you."

They walked out. Left alone, Ozai stirred from his place and began to eat from the bowl of rice porridge. Several minutes later the guards finished the rest of his floor and came back. He heard them roll the cart past his cell again and over to Deng's, at which point they stopped.

"He's still sitting there," Mo said. "I don't think he's even moved a muscle."

"Do you think we should check it out?" Kinchil asked.
"I guess it's a good idea."

Ozai heard them push open the door and enter the cell. The guards seemed to try several things to get the commander's attention, but to no avail. The door slammed and they walked out.

"I don't get it," said Mo. "One minute he's shouting loud enough for the whole floor under to hear, and now he's pretending to be a statue."

"It's probably the solstice," Kinchil replied. "The rift is really thin now and it makes it easier to get in contact with the spirit world."

"Huh?"

"The solstice makes the rift thin."

"What rift?"

"Oh, it's just the boundary between our world and the spirit world. It's what separates our realms in essence but makes it so that they can coexist."

"Oh…" Mo seemed to give this some thought. "So, why the solstice in particular?"

"I think it has something to do with the moon," Kinchil said. "The solstice is when the moon wins out over the sun for most of the day, and the moon affects the tides, so its effect should be more powerful. And the rift is made of water, so the moon's pull on it must be at its strongest too."

Mo began to laugh. "Kinchil, you're starting to turn into a mini-Deng. Just listen to yourself: 'The rift is made of water.' Haha!"

The newer guard's voice acquired a hint of defiance. "Well, yeah! There's a spirit guardian who guards the rift, and it's a waterbending spirit. More accurately, she. She's the daughter of the Moon and Ocean spirits, the ones who created the rift, and water is her native element. That's why crossing the rift with waterbending is the easiest way. But you can do it with any other element too, like Deng does with fire."

"Hold on. How does plain water or fire get you across a rift to the spirit world?"

"Well, it can't be just plain water or fire. See, you have to grasp a connection, like finding a bone or something that's connected to an animal's departed spirit, then you bend to send your chi through it, then…"

Their chatter faded down the hallway. Unbeknownst to the two guards, Ozai had pressed his head up against the bars of his cage, hanging on to their every word until he could no longer hear them. Whether out of boredom or degradation, he was starting to become interested in this spirit baloney. In all his life he had prided himself on being pragmatic – concerned with the affairs of real people and grounded in the world he inhabited. The opposite of his father and brother, in other words. But now he found himself pondering over all the esoteric principles he had shunned, trying to piece them into a logical whole.

He sighed.

He went back to drawing things with the splinter, erasing the sandy surface to sketch a picture of two realms separated by a wavy boundary.

He figured that if he could access another reality like Deng, he'd want to stay there too.
Celestial Mechanics

The evening sky over Capital City was aglow. Colored rockets soared into the air and exploded in bursts of brilliant color, their booms echoing through the crater city which was equally alive with sound and light. For once, there was little distinction between the upper-class district within the crater and the lower one at the mountain's base – both were enveloped in the same air of celebration, their streets lit with hanging lanterns and bustling with people in their best clothes.

Despite the chill that still lingered at the end of the first month, the city was pervaded by warmth that came from countless food vendors and firebending street performers that attracted people at every turn. Though the largest gathering was to be found in the middle of the upper district, around a large stone sundial. When the sun rose the next morning and the first shadow appeared on the dial's face, it would mean that the sun had risen on a new year. The year of the rat. Likenesses of the creature flitted in and out of view, from paper kites flying around in children's hands to little origami figures handed out as souvenirs.

It was on this rare occasion that average citizens were allowed near the inner gates of the palace, where the royal guards and Imperial Firebenders handed out gifts and accepted blessings for the Fire Lord. They were the traditional things, like longevity, prosperity, and good luck.

Zuko himself was alone, however, pacing around in an antechamber to the throne room. Apart from routine reports from his police that everything in the city was going well, he was detached from the people's festivities – he had his own to attend to. New Year's was a holiday he wouldn't be spending with any of his friends. It was an official Fire Nation holiday, and he was the official Fire Lord now. He'd have to get used to his ministers' company eventually, since he had a lifetime of symbolic and ceremonial duties to look forward to.

He had only invited a select few to the event he had planned. Of course there were obligatory ones to choose from like his war council members, but for once Zuko forced himself to be honest with himself and invited only the ones he genuinely enjoyed being around. The guest list ended up totaling eleven people, nearly all of whom were reported to have arrived already. But the Fire Lord had to be the last to show according to custom, so he had to wait.

Zuko paced back and forth across the stone floor, zoned out to the point where the fireworks outside had become background noise. His mind was on one thing only, and it was making him both eager and impatient.

At last there was a flap of the entrance curtain as his guard stepped inside. "My lord! Ukano for you."

Zuko's gaze trailed towards the curtain, mouth spreading into a smile. At the same moment a middle-aged man stepped into the room, and a familiar smiling face appeared, warm gray eyes finding Zuko's own. The man bowed. "Fire Lord Zuko."

The two of them approached each other and met at the center of the room. Mai's father was more wrinkled and tired-looking than Zuko remembered him, likely due to all the stresses he had undergone as governor of an occupied Omashu. But despite it all, his calm voice and demeanor remained the same. Zuko had sent a personal summons to his temporary workplace some weeks ago, and to his delight Ukano had promptly replied, stating that he was ready to undergo an interrogation and swear his loyalty to Zuko.

Now, Ukano was back in palace robes, a modest flame clip adorning his topknot. Zuko placed a
hand on his shoulder and lifted his chin in playful regality. "I trust your interrogation went all right, Ukano?"

Ukano smiled. "Well, your police were as strict as they should have been. They did not take it easy on me. I'm assuming since you've given me the honor of tonight's invitation that I passed."

"Yes. You did." Zuko stepped back. "May the blessings of the new year be upon you."

"And to you as well, my lord." Ukano gave a slight bow.

Both of their gazes went to the doors of the throne room, where twin gold carvings of the new year animal hung over the wood. A mythical rat stood in the center with its snout pointed upwards to the heavens, waves of water running beneath it.

"There's been talk that the year of a water creature foretells difficulties for a fire people," Zuko mused.

Ukano gave a humored shrug of the shoulder. "Well, I'm not one for superstition, my lord. Water is merely the element of... change, if I recall correctly."

Zuko nodded.

"And by the looks of it, the great changes have already begun," Ukano continued. "What do we have to fear from them? I'm certain that if we keep to the direction we're going and embrace the changes we are undertaking, then the new year will hold good things for the Fire Nation too."

"I hope so," Zuko said.

He thought back to the outpouring of written and spoken blessings that his guards had been reporting to him throughout the day. They had even allowed themselves the remark that they had never seen such a display of support for a Fire Lord before. This had warmed Zuko's heart, but it had also made him anxious. Of course people would rally themselves behind the only person they could count on for change. If he failed... he'd fail millions.

Pushing the thought aside, Zuko turned his attention back to Ukano and offered a smile. "How is Mai doing?"

Ukano's expression became somewhat somber. "She's been frustrated with me because I've been coming home at late hours every night. I was transferred to that post office, you see. I suppose the police had some sort of order in which they wanted to interrogate everyone, and that was what they chose for me to keep me busy. But the head postman and I would get so much work sometimes that we couldn't come home for an evening at all. We'd spend the night there." He shook his head. "Truthfully it never seemed like my busyness bothered her before, so I didn't expect such a reaction. But I was foolish to think so."

"It's all right, Ukano," Zuko said. "Now that you're my personal secretary, I'll make sure you have enough time to visit your family. No more post offices and no more chaos."

Ukano inclined his head. "Thank you, Zuko. I'm sure my family will be delighted to see you again soon." He stepped back. "I suppose I should enter the room now."

"Go ahead. I'll be there in a moment."

Ukano bowed again and left. Zuko strode over to a nearby window, where he could see a slice of the upper city, a lake of tiny flames. He took it in for a moment, basking in the contented stillness, then
turned around to enter the throne room.

The large room had been repurposed to a makeshift theater, with twenty chairs facing the Fire Lord's pedestal which was currently hidden by a sheet of curtains. Behind them Zuko could hear faint scuffles and voices as the actors from the Capital City Theater Company completed the final preparations for their performance. He had placed a request with them the previous month to do something with music and dancing. The play company had reacted with confusion, for they had had nothing of the sort in their normal arrangement, but had promised to think of something.

Zuko allowed his servants to take the lead and escort him towards the audience area. At once, everyone who had been seated rose to face him and bowed. Apart from Ukano, there were ten people there: Zuko's gaze skated over the faces of the generals he had invited, as well as Captain Lang and Warden Poon.

He proceeded after the guards to the very back of their group, where his throne stood on an elevated platform. Here he had an unobstructed view of the stage as well as the backs of everyone's heads. Ukano was in the row closest to him on his right, and towards the left was General Shinu sandwiched between the police captain and the warden.

It was clear that in this more tight-knit circle, his nobles had begun to relax and talk more informally with each other. Once Zuko was seated, they all went back to their conversations.

"Don't remember the last time I've been to see a play," Captain Lang remarked, reclining back in his chair. "Must've been when my cousins dragged us to the lower city theater in our twenties… Those were fun times."

Poon shrugged his broad shoulders. "Muh. I was never one for plays. S'pose it's nice every now and then, though."

"Aw, come on, Poon, I'm sure anything beats sitting in that musty tower all day."

"Yeah, like sitting in your fancy office with a padded chair and perfumed scrolls," Poon retorted. Lang laughed. "The chair is not padded, Poon. I assure you."

Between them, General Shinu cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly. "So, Warden Poon, I'm curious, what is the average day in the prison tower like?"

"I tend to block it all out when I go home," Poon replied gruffly.

Captain Lang threw his head back in laughter and smacked a hand over Shinu's shoulder. Zuko found himself laughing as well. Lang and Shinu looked back at him, the general with a nervous smile on his face, though at the sight of Zuko it mellowed out somewhat and he began to chuckle along with Lang.

Lang wiped an eye and nudged the general's shoulder. "I bet we're a lot more interesting than those Yuyan Archers of yours, eh?"

"I suppose," Shinu agreed. "We do train them to be stoic and silent. Heh..." His gaze flickered awkwardly to Zuko again. "So... ah, my lord, Captain Lang and Warden Poon and I were curious, what kind of play is this going to be?"

"I told them to think of something that would be fitting for the occasion." A smile tugged at Zuko's mouth. "We'll see what happens."
At last the scuffles and motions behind the stage died down. The lights dimmed, and a hush fell over the room. Zuko felt a familiar shudder of anticipation course through him as the spotlight shone down on the center of the stage.

The curtains parted, revealing several actors against a sunny village backdrop. There was some introductory music from a hidden orchestra, then the story began. It was a farce about a robbery of some sort. The villagers were supposed to come from a fictional culture, and to accentuate their exoticness the piece included brief songs and lots of strange gestures. In the crucial moment the thief turned out to be a waterbender, and a cloud of authentic mist issued from somewhere beneath the stage to represent the man concealing himself. Zuko admired the special effects, eyes wide.

The pseudo-waterbender ran through several more scenes, commanding blue-colored ribbons with which he tripped people and whacked them. Suddenly Zuko's mind flashed back to a scroll he had been reading the previous day within the Dragonbone Catacombs. In it there had been a drawing of a woman bending water in a circle around herself. She had to have been a spirit – she had long white hair and a body that ended in the tail of a koi fish. In addition there had been two koi above her head, one black and one white, who Zuko realized must have been the Moon and Ocean Spirits. But they had been drawn in a clearly Fire-Nation style, and in between the circling fish there was a flame.

The one thing he had had trouble understanding was the inscription beneath the image. He had recognized the words 'Moon' and 'Ocean', but there was also 'Keeper' and 'Bridge'. He had guessed it had something to do with the rift, and was resolved to go back the next day and read some more.

This was linked with another matter, for Zuko had extended an invitation to Khufu as well, but the sage had respectfully declined and said there was an urgent matter he and the others needed to take care of. Zuko made a mental note to check up on them after the celebrations.

Presently, however, he sank back into his chair, letting the dim stillness of the audience area envelop him again. He watched the rest of the play in contentment. The plot was well-crafted and the dialogue surprisingly witty. Every so often his eyes flickered to his ministers, observing their posture and faces whenever they turned their heads. Despite the faint lightning he could tell they were involved as well. It made him happy.

His eyes landed on the back row again, on Lang, Poon, and Shinu's trio, then finally Ukano. He felt a smile form on his face.

It turned out that all one had to do was assemble a good crowd, he mused. All he needed were the right people, and then ruling would be easy.

Over on the stage, a few villagers had linked arms and began to step in graceful circles around each other. Shinu leaned forward, tapping his chin. "Hm. Interesting addition of the dance…” he whispered.

"It's choreographed well,” Lang murmured.

But Zuko felt let down a little. It wasn't dancing. Just controlled spinning. He watched the actors’ feet as they unlinked their hands and twirled around, their robes and skirts swishing, face paint shimmering. But all of it was mechanical. Like the engine of a fire nation warship, like the spinning turbines of a drill. Back and forth, step one, step two…
The morning after the celebration was a quiet one. Most of the townspeople had returned to their homes after the break of dawn, and now the city basked in a sleepy haze, the sunlight spilling over confetti-strewn streets and shuttered windows of houses.

Zuko woke up early and pulled on his day robes, immediately making his way down to the Dragonbone Catacombs.

There the sages had cleared a reading room for him, all the scrolls and books he had amassed laid out on the desk. At the center he had left the scroll with the black-and-white sketch of the female spirit, along with the numerous translation scrolls and notes he had started the previous day. Zuko read through them to jog his memory and did another stab at the characters beneath her name. But he got nothing.

Sighing, he went back to the bookshelves. He browsed through the titles with his eyes squinted, looking for anything even remotely related to the spirit world. He pulled up the ladder and scoured the topmost shelves, then traveled down again towards the bottom ones. At last, cramped in a dark back corner where he had to make a flame from his fingers to see properly, his gaze alighted on a title: Book of Spirits.

Zuko's eyes widened. He doused his flame and pulled it out. The book was yellowed from decades of use and its binding had clearly been repaired several times, but it was in reasonable condition. He opened it up to the inside cover.

The Book of Spirits, compiled by Fire Sages Anubis and Amaron in the Fifth Month of the Second Hundredth Year of the Blessed Lord Atem Ra's Empire. Long may his teachings live and long may the Fire Nation prosper.

There were a couple more paragraphs of introductory text, and Zuko was filled with relief to find that most of the characters were modern ones. The book turned out to be an encyclopedia of sorts. It catalogued information about known spirits, providing their habitat and characteristics, even distinguishing between bending and nonbending ones. Zuko flipped through the entries until he came to the water section.

At last he found her.

Lia

Rift Guardian

Genealogy: Daughter of Tui(Moon) and La(Ocean)

The name sent an echo of reminder through Zuko's mind. Lia. He could have sworn he had heard it somewhere, but he couldn't place where.

He read on.


Beneath the text was a drawing. This one was colored – Zuko immediately noticed the shimmering blue color of her tail and the matching blue of her eyes, which resembled those of the Water Tribe peoples.

He turned the page, but the book had already switched to the next spirit. Lia's section had ended just
as short as the others.

Zuko ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. He went back to the other scroll he couldn't decipher and continued to scourge it, but another half hour returned little progress. Soon the candle he had brought to gauge his time was nearly half gone. With a sigh, he took the scroll and got up from the table.

He left the library in search of Khufu, peering into various chambers in the hopes of finding the man there. At last his feet took him to the room of the Rift Scale, where upon his entry five sages turned from what they were doing and bowed, Khufu among them.

The storm of nagging questions in Zuko's mind froze as he approached the Great Sage and saw his expression, gray and sleepless. Zuko lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Hello, Khufu. Is everything all right?"

Khufu shook his head. "Unfortunately not, Your Majesty. Our problem persists."

Zuko turned his attention to the large contraption at the head of the room. On the whole it looked the same as when he had first seen it: the dark, porous stone that lay up on the scale was still heavier than the light one. And the flame that burned in the container was still a feeble ember, looking unfittingly small.

A thought occurred to him. "The solstice passed weeks ago. Shouldn't the flame have started thickening by now?"

"Yes, my lord. According to our calculations it should have been back to half of its normal density by now. But it has hardly thickened an inch since you came here last."

Zuko looked up at the two stones again. "The dark one's still heavier. You said it's dangerous if it's like that for too long a time."

"Indeed," Khufu replied. "It means that things are just as we feared. The spirit world has become imbalanced."

Zuko felt a stir of dread. His gaze shifted to the other sages who stood at the sides. "So, what are we going to do about it?"

The sages remained silent. Khufu voiced the thoughts behind their expressions moments later with a sigh. "Unfortunately there isn't anything we can do right now. We may only observe the development. If it worsens…"

"Then what?"

For the first time the old sage's expression became shadowed with dread. "Then there will be no more time for festivities, my lord. It will be time for humanity to answer for its crimes." His gaze fell to the scroll that hung open from Zuko's hand. "And we will answer before her."

Zuko looked down at the female spirit, her gaze deadly and ferocious.

…

That same day, the waves were lapping calmly against the shore of the hospital island. Azula sat in her wheelchair, looking out at the Fire Nation ship that had occupied the dock. It was time again—the stocks of Isla’s herbal supply had begun to run low and the past week’s meals had been bland and monotone for lack of ingredients. But things had changed over the course of the winter pause:
One of Dr. Low’s major suppliers had shut down their location in the western port city, forcing him to write hawks back and forth, negotiating deals with others. Finally he had found a replacement, and had spent the past few days preparing for his voyage to meet with them.

Now at last he emerged from the building in his military uniform and boots, adjusting his arm cuffs. Kira was following behind.

"So, new trays and new silverware…" he was saying to her. "Anything wrong with the old ones?"

Kira shrugged, putting on a smile. "Nope, we just thought it would make for a better change. Plastic is lighter for one thing, and it's a bit cheerier than metal."

"Hm. Well, all right, I'll put it on the list. Anything else?"

Kira shook her head. "Nope!"

"All right, then. Have a good rest." Dr. Low walked down the ramp. He took a few steps through the sand, then turned to Azula and Isla who stood to the side. He gave them a parting nod.

"Well, see you in a week," he said.

Azula looked at him and found the question worming its way out of her. "Do you really have to go meet with them? Can't you just order everything by letter?"

"Well, I have to touch base with them at least once," Dr. Low replied. "Suppliers usually don't like making deals with people they haven't met face-to-face. Don't worry, they think I'm operating an exotic spa." He chuckled.

"Oh."

Azula didn't say anything else. By his relaxed demeanor he seemed to not have noticed the towels covering the mirrors in the bedrooms and bathrooms. And thanks to her way with lies, he thought that her covering the metal parts of her bed and wheelchair with red paint had been a random art project. He'd leave the island in the bliss of ignorance, which had indeed been her plan the whole time. But now for some stupid reason she felt bad about it.

She reclined in the chair, crossing her arms and looking out at the ship in dissatisfaction. But even if she could have guessed what her subconscious wanted to change about the situation, it was too late. Dr. Low took a few more steps towards the dock, away from them.

"I'll bring back some post-New Year's gifts," he called back.

Isla smiled. "Not too many. We only have one storage room."

He pondered for a moment. "Hmm… How about a bonsai tree? You know, last time I was at the port I met a vendor, and he said they grow them in a sacred temple right in the city. He showed me all these beautiful ones, with flowers and colored leaves…"

Isla crinkled her nose in humor and her voice acquired a playful tone. "Oh, come on, you actually believe they do that? They import them all from manufacturers in the east coast. And they paint them."

Dr. Low lifted his eyebrows. "Well, well."

Isla laughed. "Just make it a surprise. It's better that way."
"Noted." Dr. Low smiled at her and Azula. "Take care."

Azula watched as Dr. Low went off towards the ship. He boarded it, then the gangplank was pulled up and the large iron vessel began to back away from the dock. Within minutes, it was out on the open waters. She breathed a sigh.

Isla cast her a steady gaze, but didn't comment. The two of them hung in their own wordless contemplations for a while, the wind stirring through their hair. Then Azula felt the nurse gently take the handlebars again.

"Come on. Let's go back."

Azula sat still as Isla turned away her wheelchair and rolled her back into the building. Nira, Mira, and Kira awaited them in the front room, where they had watched the departure. Now their gazes went to her as Isla slowed her wheelchair to a stop.

Mira crossed her arms. "So she didn't tell him."

Isla did not respond. Beside Mira, Nira gave a shrug. "Obviously she doesn't want to."

"I don't," Azula said.

Mira slapped her forehead and groaned. Kira approached. "Azula, you have to deal with this. We can't keep turning away your mirrors and painting over your silverware."

Azula slapped the arm of the chair. "But then she'll come back!"

"There's no one here!" Mira shouted.

Azula cast her a death glare.

Kira sighed and shook her head. She approached Azula, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You have to tell Dr. Low, Azula. This has been going on for far too long."

Azula's gaze trailed down to the floor. "I tried telling him. He didn't believe me."

Mira swept out a hand in disbelief. "So what, we're just going to keep making him think that nothing's wrong? Like it's completely fine that she can hardly pass by a reflective surface anymore or splash water over her face in the morning?"

"It's fine!" Azula shouted. Her fingers had curled into claws over the armrests.

"No it's not!" Mira retorted. "I don't care what ingrained phobia you have about telling him. Dr. Low has to deal with this!"

"I don't want him to deal with it! I don't want him dealing with her!"

Mira's eyes rolled up and she slapped her forehead again. "Oh my… How can't you understand that your mother is not here? I mean, I'd get it if you said you saw a spirit – then we'd see it too! But the fact that we don't see anything means it's not a spirit, which means that your mother can't be anything other than your imagination!"

Nira frowned and tapped her chin. "That's not true. Spirits can make themselves selectively invisible."

"But still, then there'd be signs!" Mira said. "I mean, what do angry spirits do? They destroy things
and mess with everyone they run into!"

"Well, Azula's obviously being tormented by Ursa," Nira pointed out. "Spirits sometimes have vendettas against particular people."

Mira swiveled around towards Nira, hands on hips. "Is Azula's mother a spirit, Nira? I don't think so!"

"Maybe it's a spirit disguised as Azula's mother."

"Then why hasn't it attacked any of us yet?" Mira retorted. "Why didn't it come to me disguised as my old landlady? It's been two months already – by all logic this place should be a pile of splinters by now!"

Nira shrugged, turning out her palms. "Well, maybe it just sees Azula as an easy target."

Rage boiled up inside Azula and she slammed her hands against the armrests. "I am not an easy target! I am not being visited by a stupid spirit! I'm being attacked by someone who's always wanted to get rid of me, and I am going to kick her out of here alone! I don't need you people yammering about it all the time and I don't need Dr. Low constantly wondering what's wrong with me!"

Mira turned to her. "Okay, fine! But then you have to stop screaming about her all the time, stop punching into empty space, and start eating from regular bowls again! Deal?"

Azula narrowed her eyes. She started to retort, but Kira cut in. "Mira, you're being silly. If Azula could stop getting upset like this, she would. Obviously this is something she can't help doing."

Azula grumbled and leaned back in the chair, rolling up her eyes.

No one else made a comment. Kira's face grew contemplative in the meantime, and after a few moments she stepped away from them and began to pace around. "Come to think of it, if Azula's visions are as vivid as she says they are, then it would make sense that a spirit's causing them... This island was abandoned for years before we came. Maybe a spirit settled down here and got angry when we started building things on top of its home."

Nira shrugged. "Well, then we just have to wait until it calms down, right?"

Kira pursed her lips. "Actually, I don't think it's that simple. When a spirit becomes violent, it usually stays that way until whatever's bothering it is taken care of. And if it's not, then things get worse."

Nira's eyebrows shot up. "Worse? What do you mean, worse?"

"Well, the spirit stops making threats and starts doing bodily harm," Kira said. "I remember reading it in a scroll my parents had. Spirits who have dwellings in the mortal world have usually been here for a long time. They like stability. And when something happens to cause chaos and disrupt their habitat, then they get angry. First they start attacking the people who caused the disruption. Then if that doesn't return things to the way they are, they start attacking bystanders, and eventually everybody else who sets foot on their home for even a moment."

Nira bit her lip.

Kira tapped her chin some more, then suddenly realization flashed in her eyes. "And the metal factory that used to be here got transferred, didn't it? Maybe it wasn't an accident that those workers all wanted to leave. Maybe the spirit chased them away. Maybe it started giving them visions, but then when those weren't enough it resorted to, well... more extreme measures." She pursed her lips.
Nira's eyes flashed with alarm now. "Um… well, okay, then we have to do something about it! There has to be a way we can… I don't know, appease it?" She looked askance at Mira, who was unfazed and scowling, then back at Kira. "Maybe we should demolish this whole building and start over again!"

Mira's mouth fell open. "Yeah, imagine putting that on the to-do list! You complete wood-brain, Nira!"

Azula almost laughed.

But Kira remained serious and swept her gaze across the contours of the room. "It might very well be a problem with the building. But maybe it's not even the fact that it's here – maybe we defiled some sort of sacred spot for the spirit when we renovated. Azula's visions did only start after we finished the last round. What with the heating system and all the pipes."

Nira began to wring her hands together. "Okay, so how do we find out what we did wrong exactly?"

"I'm not sure. I know there are ways to communicate with spirits, but it was all in that scroll… I guess I could write to my mother and ask if she still has it…"

"Okay, let's do that!"

But Kira shook her head. "Still… I remember her saying it's very dangerous. If you approach an angry spirit the wrong way, you could upset it even more. Worse, you could direct all of its rage to yourself."

Nira's hopeful smile came crashing down. "So what, then, we do nothing?"

"Well, I don't think that's right answer either. If there really is a violent spirit here, then it could get even more violent."

Nira clenched her fists. "Then we have to stop it! I don't care what we have to do, I don't want it getting more violent! I don't want it to possess me!"

She began to back away and bumped into Mira, who pushed her off and grasped her shoulders. "There is no spirit, Nira!"

"How do you know? Can you prove there isn't?"

"I don't have to prove it!" Mira shouted. "There clearly isn't! Why is everyone so crazy all of a sudden?"

"Because it's the spirit messing with us!" Nira shot back. "It wants to take us all down one by one, just like Azula said! Just like it did to the factory workers!" She grasped the sides of her head and began to breathe rapidly. "No… no… This can't be happening… I don't want to be next! I don't want to die in the middle of the ocean!"

Nira took a few frantic steps away and stopped at the center of the hallway. Her gaze darted between them all, face red and panicked.

Right then Isla stepped out from behind the wheelchair. "Calm down." She went to Nira and lowered her arms gently to her sides. "Everybody calm down. I agree with Mira. There's no spirit."

Everyone looked at Isla. Nira bit her lip. "What makes you so sure?"
"Because if Azula were being possessed, she wouldn't be having dreams about it or trying to fight it," Isla said. "She'd be frozen and helpless and it would feel like her own body didn't belong to her. She wouldn't have to ask if it was another entity invading her because she'd know. And the spirit definitely wouldn't have stopped at Azula, we'd all be seeing visions by now."

Azula listened to Isla in curiosity, brow furrowed. The other nurses exchanged glances, and Nira blinked meekly. "Really?"

"Yes, Nira, really," Isla responded. "Spirits aren't wisps of air. When they appear in the mortal world their presence leaves a physical mark – whether it's lines on the ground, or sudden wind and rain. Whatever's bothering Azula, it has to be something emotional. She needs to talk about it, and she can only do that with Dr. Low."

She took the handlebars of the wheelchair and rolled Azula away into the bedroom. There were two teapots on the counter she had been brewing, one for Azula and one for herself. She lifted the lids to check up on them.

Mira followed her inside and stopped by the doorway. "Okay, so then why have you been calmly letting her stay silent for all this time and never pushed her to say anything?"

"She has to do it when she's ready," Isla said.

"You know, I think there should be a line of some sort between lenience and laxness!"

"Well since we don't have Dr. Low here right now anyway, there's no point in arguing over it." Isla poured Azula some tea and handed her the cup.

From behind Mira, Nira lifted a finger. "I say we still be on the safe side and try not to step on any otherworldly toes."

"That could work," Kira said. "We'll cover every possible angle of the problem. And at any rate, some extra spiritual cleansing can't do any harm."

Nira smiled. "I agree!"

Isla breathed an audible sigh and lifted her head to face them. "If it makes you two feel better, clean your bedroom and hang up some tree twigs on the door. But don't start trying an exorcism, for crying out loud!" She gathered up her own teapot and left the room in exasperation.

Nira tilted her head. "An exa-whatiddy?"

"She's weird," Mira said.

Kira sighed. "But she has a point. There's only so much we can do without Dr. Low here, so let's just focus on getting by. We'll clean up, do lots of meditation and relaxation like he prescribed, and make these weeks go as smooth as possible." The nurse gave a half-smile and looked down at Azula. "You'll help us with that, won't you?"

Azula did not respond. But moments later Mira's resigned sigh answered for her.

"Yeah. Like she's done that before…"

…

The halls of the Capital City Prison tower were in a fervor. Complaints had been raining down from
the ninth floor hallway all day – burned hands, smoke intoxication, upturned soup bowls – but this
time instead of fizzing out their fallout had snowballed and spread across all the other floors. The
break room resembled a battlefield tent, the guards who were coming back from their shift angry and
frazzled, the ones who still had it before them slouching over their tea with distant expressions.

Kinchil's motions were mechanical as he walked up the steps to the ninth floor, adjusting his helmet
and arm pads. The guards who had been coming in from food rounds there had had soot all over
their uniforms, many with food stains and scratches from having other furious prisoners lunge at
them.

He pushed open the door to the cell responsible and felt like he had stepped into a coal factory. There
was so much smoke and stench of fire in the air that for a minute his breath stifled. It took Kinchil a
moment to refocus his breathing, blinking his smarting eyes, before he bent away the smoke to clear
the view of the cage. There were at least five bone-fires burning on Deng's floor, and the commander
himself was leaping back and forth, punching flames at his surroundings.

"You want a piece of me, then?" he shouted into the air. "Want a piece of me? Well, come and take
it! Hyah!" He leaned back and kicked a flame-tongue at the back wall. Moments later he whirled
around towards the bars, his blanket-cape flapping. "Oh no you don't! You'll regret ever messing
with me! Yah!"

Kinchil leaned back to block the jet of fire that shot out, the embers coming so close to his skin that
they singed.

Hot on his heels came another rush of footsteps, and Ming burst into the cell. "Hold it right there!"

She approached the cage, arms bent into a firebending pose. Deng ignored them both, whirling
instead towards one of the flames that burned on the floor and swiping his hand at it. "Go away! Get!
I'm warning you! It's one thing to chase me down when I'm among you, but to follow me back to my
own realm? No thank you! HIYAH!"

He punched another jet of fire at the flame, making the fire hiss and surge up.

"That's it!" Ming swished her hands and bent the fire away from the floor, clapping her hands over it
and making the flame disappear.

Deng turned towards another flame and shot fire at it as well, but Ming swept it away. At that point
Deng noticed her and Kinchil standing there and gave a little jump. "Who gave you permission to be
in here?"

"I don't need permission!" Ming retorted.

Deng clenched his fist. "Get out! Unless you want this place run over with fleeing spirits! Hiya!" He
smacked another tongue of flame at the floor. Ming bent it away, advancing on the cage.

"Firebend again and you'll go without food for the rest of the week!" she threatened.

"Is that a challenge?"

"No, it's a command!"

"A command, you say? Hmph! A bit of doldrums and already you're thinking of mutiny? I'll show
you your place, insolent rat!" He advanced towards the bars, mouth curling into a snarl.

Ming stepped forward as well, but Kinchil held her back by the shoulder. "Stop! Wait, stop!" He
jumped between them, holding out his arms. Deng peered down at him with a scowl and Kinchil sank to his knees, giving his best, most deferential bow.

"Commander, please forgive us, we've just been working out in the heat all day! We'll leave!"

"Leave, then! And don't you dare bother me until I've gotten these scoundrels under control!"

"Yes, Commander, we promise!" Kinchil rose to his feet, taking Ming by the arm and tugged her out of the cell. Once they were out in the hallway she wrenched free of his grasp and punched his shoulder.

"Kinchil, what the hell? In case his crazy hasn't gotten to you, you're not on his ship – he's in your prison and you're a prison guard! Why in the name of all the Fire Lords are you bowing to him?"

Kinchil gripped the sides of his helmet and shook his head fervently. "I know, I know, I'm sorry! I just know how he works, he won't respond to you unless you treat him like he's still in charge! I've been doing food rounds here for months!"

Ming scowled. She turned away and started for the stairs. Kinchil scampered after her, following her as she descended all the way to the ground floor and approached Warden Poon's door.

Ming banged on it with her fist. "Warden Poon!"

It was opened by a guard moments later, and Kinchil saw the warden behind his desk with a group of at least ten guards surrounding him. Poon scowled at them.

"What?"

Kinchil allowed Ming to enter first and closed the door behind them. Ming stomped up to Poon's desk, her fists clenched.

"Warden Poon, I've had enough of him. He's going to make the entire tower toxic and he's going to give us all third-degree burns!"

Poon rubbed his temple in exhaustion. "I'm aware, Ming."

"We have to do something!" Ming said. "We need to put him in restraint, or put him in complete darkness, or something, because these games have got to stop!"

"I second that," Shen spoke up. "I mean, it's not even funny anymore. Three days ago when I came to give him food he blasted fire right into my face. Now he's firebending nonstop. If plain old solitary confinement isn't getting him to calm down, then we've got to try something else."

Ito was sitting in a chair nearby, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "He seems to be seeing spirits that aren't there. It's likely he's trying to blast them with fire, but of course, he's too deranged to take our presence into account."

"We have to snap him out of it," Mo said. "I mean, I haven't been here that long, but if he's been deluding himself into thinking he's talking to spirits for years, then he was bound to go off the deep end eventually."

Poon grunted. "Well, in the past, those conversations were what kept him quiet. As to what's changed now, I don't have a clue."

Kinchil, who had been wringing his hands at the sidelines, finally stepped forward. "I think
something's gone wrong with the connections he's making," he said. "Lately all his flames have been turning yellow and they haven't been able to go back down to red even when he tries. He doesn't snap out of his conversations because he literally can't."

"Well maybe if he weren't so detached from reality in the first place, it would be easier for him," Mo replied.

"I think we need to transfer him," Shen said. "Sitting in the Cooler for a couple weeks would sober him up."

A shudder of dread ran down Kinchil's spine. "The Cooler?" He turned to face the other guard. "Shen, do you even know what that feels like? There's a reason they only send the worst, most dangerous convicts to the Boiling Rock!"

Shen spread out his arms. "You're saying Deng's not dangerous? He could burn this whole tower down if he wanted! The Rock is the only place for him!"

Kinchil advanced towards him, eyes enraged. "I'd like to see your face if you had your whole soul frozen solid for weeks and had your only energy source be cut off from you like your right hand! Being a firebender isn't just about making red stuff shoot out from your hands, it's having a natural need and affinity for heat! Punishing someone by taking that away should only be done in extreme cases, not just because someone's annoying you!"

"So what, do you want to wait until Deng cremates one of us alive and then get him for being a danger to regular prisons?"

Ito shook his head. "Shen, it's pointless right now. He'll only be more dangerous if we try to transport him in the state he's in. Here at least he's contained. He can't melt the bars of his cage and take his rampage across the whole town. At the very least we should wait until he winds down a bit."

"How hard can it be to just knock him out and keep him like that until we get him to the Rock?"

"No, that's wrong!" Kinchil cut in.

Poon pounded his fist on the table. "Shut up! All of you!"

They quieted down.

"The Commander's not going anywhere because I couldn't transfer him even if I tried. He was put here by a direct royal decree and so only a royal decree can unbind him from here. Of course if one of you's willing to put in a request for Fire Lord Zuko and wait four months for the palace and police to process it, then be my guest." Poon rose and paced away from the desk. "Winter's still here. It'll get colder. While it does, we'll start feeding him under-stimulating food. I'll ask the palace for some herbs to subdue his chi flow. And we'll have him spend the daylight hours outside, whether he wants to or not. That'll cool down his inner fire, too."

"Sir, that's inhumane!" Kinchil protested.

Poon rounded on him, approaching so that he towered over him. "Are you saying you have a better solution?"

"Yes, sir! Just ask him what the problem is! Have people talk to him! Don't close him out from the world, that'll only make things worse!"

"That's what the point of a prison is, Kinchil," Ito said. "We're not a resort. We're a detention facility,
and we're supposed to keep all our prisoners locked down and isolated."

Kinchil turned on him, clenching his fists. "For Agni's sake, he didn't even do anything wrong! He just criticized Azulon, I read his records!"

"It doesn't matter what he did then, what matters is what he's doing now," Ito said. "Clearly a prison like this isn't where he should be kept."

"Then we have to petition his pardoning!"

Poon stomped a foot against the ground. "That is not going to happen. Not so long as I'm breathing. I'm not about to release a prisoner that can choose to start shooting comet balls into the air at any time of day. Fire Lord Zuko might be an idealist, but I'm certain he'd agree with me."

Kinchil was silent.

"Now since you're so sympathetic to the Commander, how about I make you his personal assistant," Poon continued. "We will proceed with the plan I've just mentioned, and for the sake of monitoring his personal wellbeing, Kinchil, you can be the one to carry it out. From now on, you'll be the one responsible for bringing him food, and taking him outside, and preventing him from suffocating everyone on the ninth floor. That seem fair?"

The other guards shrugged and nodded.

"I think it is," Shen said. "If he's got no problem dealing with the Commander, let him. And if anything goes wrong, it'll be on him."

Poon glared at Kinchil. "Well?"

Kinchil lowered his head, but kept his shoulders squared. "As you say, sir. I'll do it."
Nira and Kira followed Isla's fleeting instructions and scavenged around the trees outside, gathering clumps of twigs and needles and gluing them to the bedroom doors. They spent much of the following day cleaning, and even mixed an aromatherapeutic solution to spray the air with. It made the entire place smell like spices, but didn't do much else.

The next few days were peppered with the pair's incessant chatter, after Kira managed to dig up a children's storybook about spirits from the lounge and plunged into it with a housekeeper's fanaticism. The result was a list of bizarre rules about furniture placement and color combinations that would supposedly please restless beings. Kira paced around the building with it, citing the lines of moronic prose as she directed the staff to make the necessary adjustments. Azula entered the craft room hours later to find the desks rearranged, the books and supplies resorted while the plants all stood in a random clump in the corner. Dee's office, the lounge, and the other staffs' quarters had been dealt with as well, all prophylactic, as Nira assured. Mira and Dee responded with scoffs, but the night crew appeared to be more gullible, deferring to Kira as if to an enlightened master.

Isla's bedroom alone remained untouched by the fray. There were no sticks glued to the door, no taped-up faucets, and no powders coating the shine on the floor. The air didn't smell like spices, only a hint of whatever mixture she currently had simmering on her counter. Everything else she carefully wafted out through the window. Her bed stood neatly made in the corner, accompanied by a bookshelf and some flowers. The rest resembled a cozy home apothecary - dark wooden cabinets, jars, and measuring tools.

Azula's own room seemed distant here, where the towel still covered her mirror and her painted-up wheelchair stood by the bed like a sick thing. Mira had begun to shriek at Kira earlier that morning, slamming drawers and throwing out incense jars with the last of her strained patience. The fallout still carried over from the other end of the hallway. Azula tuned it out, focusing instead on her tray of breakfast, which she sat with at Isla's corner table. Isla was silent as well, facing the counter where she was brewing Azula's serum. Despite its relative distance from the others, the room was surprisingly permeable - the walls rumbled with every slamming door, and every couple minutes there would be a skidding chair or a sigh. But Isla never flinched; she simply continued her work, cutting roots and squeezing juices.

"So how exactly do you do that?" Azula spoke up.

Isla glanced over her shoulder. "Hm?"

"The serum. You said hardly anyone knows how to do it. Where did you learn?"

"Oh. I studied under a master herbalist," Isla replied. "She derived it from a family recipe. But you can't just mix the ingredients to get it right. You have to… ah, how do I put it… feel it, I guess." She took the mixing bowl into her arm and began to stir the ingredients, not with a pestle like she usually did but with two fingers. "Whenever you add the next component, you have to feel the whole solution and see how it's developing. Each time is different because the plants are a little bit different. They soaked up different amounts of nutrients from the soil and they grew in different weather conditions. And those subtle variations combine to create bigger ones."
Azula observed with an odd fascination as the nurse's hand became caked with the familiar purplish color of the goo. "But they're just plants. How are you supposed to feel all that stuff from them?"

"You feel their chi," Isla said. "Plants have chi stored in them too, after all. It's like how a firebender senses the chi that inhabits a flame. Only in this case you're not bending anything, you're just... passively perceiving the energy in your environment. You have to sense the chi of all the substances in the serum and make sure they're behaving right."

"So that's something you don't have to be a bender to learn?"

Isla shook her head. "Nope. Anyone can do it. At least... if you have a natural affinity for it. My teacher tried dozens of apprentices in her time, but she told me that her lessons only ever worked if her student had an inborn sensitivity already. A chi-perception, if you will. But it's not that common. In fact, she only had two other students at the time besides me."

"Wow."

Isla kept mixing until the serum acquired the consistency of honey. Then she washed out her hands and proceeded to line up the empty dosage bottles. These she had meticulously cleaned beforehand and disinfected with steam. Azula had looked on with a mix of pity and wonder as the nurse had struck matches to light her furnace, then put the pan of water inside, and used long pincers to hang the bottles neck-down over the vapors until the water boiled out.

Now the clean bottles stood side-by-side on her countertop, their glass bellies glinting in the light. But here for some reason the glare didn't stir any sort of panic inside her. Azula watched Isla take cupfuls of the serum and pour them into the bottles through a beaker, the purple liquid filling all the way up to the necks.

"So you're really sure it's not a spirit?" Azula spoke up.

Isla nodded. "Yes. I'm positive."

"How do you know, though?"

Isla lowered her head a little, and behind the strands of black hair that fell over her face Azula saw the nurse leer at the door in annoyance. "I've dealt with those kinds of situations before. Enough to tell when it's real and when it's in people's heads."

"Have you ever seen a spirit?"

Isla gave a brief pause. "Yes."

"Did you speak to it?"

"Yes."

Azula's eyes widened. "What kind was it?"

"It was a spirit that could disguise itself as other spirits," Isla replied. "Kind of like Koh the Face Stealer, if you've heard of him. Only this one mimicked other beings' characteristics instead of stealing them. But once you broke its illusion, you'd always see it for what it was."

"What did it disguise itself as?"

"It disguised itself as another spirit I wanted to see. But after talking to it for quite some time, I
realized it couldn't possibly be the real thing, and I ended up uncovering it." She finished corking the next bottle and leaned back against the counter. Her gaze trailed down to her shoes. "Unfortunately the other people around me hadn't been able to do that. They were convinced it was real and went on believing everything it said. And it got frustrating."

Azula began to fiddle around with her teaspoon, stirring the liquid. "How do you go into the spirit world? Can a regular person do it?"

Isla considered this. "Well, if by 'regular' you mean someone who has no training, then I don't think so."

"What kind of training do you need?"

"Well, you need meditation. You need to know how to relax your body and tune into your spiritual aura. It's complicated."

Azula's eyebrows lifted. "Can you do it?"

A faint dejection seemed to flicker across Isla's face, but she masked it with a smile. "No. Unfortunately not."

Azula took the teapot and poured out the rest of the tea. She drained her cup, then stared at the empty bottom for a few moments. She found herself speaking. "Back when you guys brought me in here, when you were doing the operation on me, I kept seeing a meadow. There was a boy there with me. It seems like a dream now, but when I was there it felt really real."

"You think you were in the spirit world?"

"I don't know where I was. But it felt different from any dream I ever had before. And I couldn't firebend. I know you can't bend in the spirit world." She paused. "Why is that, anyway?"

Isla scratched her head. "Well... it's because the energy sources that fuel your bending are grounded in the mortal world. And when you're in the spirit world, you're cut off from those sources, so naturally you're cut off from your bending."

"Huh? What sources?"

"Well, firebending is fueled by the energy of the sun. Waterbending is fueled by the energy of the moon. Earthbending comes from the energy within the earth, and airbending is sustained by the energy permeating the cosmos."

Azula dug her fist into her chin. "But how is that supposed to work? All my firebending teachers told me that I had to rely on the chi in my own body. They never said anything about the sun. Or are you saying that the energy that comes from the sun and the moon and all that stuff is the same kind of energy that humans have?"

Isla nodded. "Yes. That's exactly what it is."

Azula's eyebrows shot up. "So your source is always the same type of energy no matter what element you bend?"

"Yes."

"But how do you know that?"
Isla cast her a strange, regretful smile. "Because I can feel it."

Towards the end of the second week, a hawk arrived. Azula was having lunch in the craft room when the quiet was pierced by a screech and the sound of flapping wings. She saw Isla rush for the back entrance, then a minute later the nurse came back up the hallway with the bird sitting on her arm. "Letter from Dr. Low," she announced to everyone.

Heads poked out of various rooms and Nira clapped her hands. "Yippee! Letter!"

Mira, Kira, and Dee emerged as well and followed Isla into the craft room. They all sat down in the desks around Azula while Isla read through the scroll that had been bound to the bird's back.

"So he closed the deal with the supplier," Isla said. "That means more good west-coast food for us."

"Yes!" said Nira.

"He'll have to wait another week for the trays, though. The new manufacturer didn't have any plastic ones in stock and they have to wait for the factory in Fire Fountain City to make them. They're still harvesting the raw materials."

There were a few sighs.

"So he'll take another week to get back here?" Dee asked.

"It seems so," Isla said. "But at least we'll have them."

Mira squinted. "Did he say anything about the… what was it called… matte silverware?"

"Yeah. The supplier was a little confused as to what we meant by that, but he said they could give us wood utensils. Those won't cast a shine."

Mira exhaled. "Well, thank the heavens. At least we'll have that over with."

Isla skimmed through the rest of the letter. "Well, other than that, he sends us all greetings and hopes we're doing well." A smile tugged at her mouth. "Says he met another scholar in the city and they spent a whole evening talking about firebending mechanics."

"Sounds like he's living it up," Nira said.

Kira smiled as well. "I think it's good he's getting a little break. And he doesn't have to go too much out of his way to get everything."

Isla nodded. "Yep. He says everything will be fine."

Mira cast Azula a glance. "What about you? Any more visions yet?"

"No," Azula said.

A bemused laugh escaped Mira's lips. "So it's almost like we didn't even have to do this. All we had to do was say we'd make the visions go away and they'd go away."

Nira lifted a finger in the air. "That's called the placebo effect!"

"Well, it's still legitimate," Kira responded. "If something has a helpful effect, then it helps."
Sometimes the right treatment in medicine can be a simple one."

Dee was unable to resist a sarcastic sigh. "Well, if you call turning the building inside-out 'simple'..."

"We're just being careful!" Nira responded. "Besides, the human mind likes reorganization. And once we have the new stuff, maybe the spirit will be calmed down enough and we can put some things back to where they were. Right, Kira?"

Azula rolled her eyes, drowning them out as they began to banter about hypochondria and medical best practice. By chance her gaze alighted upon Isla, right as the nurse's eyelids fluttered briefly and she placed a hand on her forehead.

The motion was subtle, something that distracted eyes might have seen as simply brushing off some stray hair. But moments later her eyes met Azula's, and as Azula peered into the woman's glazed gray irises she felt a stir of dread and understanding kindle inside her.

The following morning, Isla was quiet. On the surface, her behavior might have seemed the same – she rarely talked while she worked, and it was usually Mira and Nira's quipping that filled the silence during the morning routine. But this silence was different. Isla's motions were slower, her footsteps soft as if too great a jolt would unleash an greater flare of pain.

Azula waited until she and Isla were left alone, the nurse stocking the last of the freshly-laundered towels into the cabinets.

"Do you have a headache?" Azula asked.

Isla gave a barely-perceptible nod.

"Is it like what happened before?"

Isla nodded again and rubbed her temple. "It's nothing I haven't felt before. I'll get through it."

"Has that always happened to you?"

"Yes. Since I was a girl... It gets better or worse depending on my lifestyle." She strode towards the window and parted the blinds with her fingers. "It's a full moon. Means I probably won't get a full night's sleep."

"But we're Fire Nation," Azula said. "The moon can't affect us, only the sun."

Isla gave a wan smile. "The moon affects everyone. And there's a saying in my old village: During the full moon, even the fish don't bite."

Azula furrowed her brow.

Isla went towards the door in the meantime. "I'll be in my room. You should get some rest as well. If anything happens, just stay calm and call us."

She left, closing it softly behind her.

Azula got up from her bed and went towards the blinds. Indeed, she could see a small daytime moon peeking up from between two clouds, round and silver. After some thought, she twisted them closed.

She let the day pass quietly, lying in her bed and reading news scrolls. Then after lunch she was
taken over by a lethargic drowsiness, and she laid out the asana mat Dee had given her. After everything, she still despised daytime naps, clinging to her childhood association of them with sickness and aimlessness. And she figured that if anything, the monotony of meditation would help her feel more grounded in herself.

Azula lay down on her back and closed her eyes, tuning into her the sound of her breaths. But once the heaviness of relaxation settled into her muscles, her mind began to wander again. Her concentration on her body slipped, and before she knew it, she fell asleep.

Azula opened her eyes to see herself standing before the window again. But now the sky outside was hued red, the daytime moon replaced by a large, blazing comet. Sozin's Comet, hanging in the air like a leering beast. The sea was a sheet of choppy black waves beneath it.

She turned around, and instead of her hospital bedroom she was greeted with the sight of her large palace dressing room. The cabinets and counter had become her wooden commodes, the vanity with the towel tossed over it vanished for the huge splintered wall mirror.

Azula stepped towards it, staring out at her reflection in the shards that remained. Her gaze ran over her hospital attire, her paled skin and grown-out hair, finally fixing on the amber eyes that echoed the shock and fear that still simmered deep within her.

*What's wrong with me?* she thought. *Why do I still feel this way? Sozin's Comet is over!*

She was answered with silence.

Then, light as a feather stroke, she felt a whisper of cold air. It was as if a door had opened somewhere and began to let in a draft. Gradually, the whisper turned into a current, and the cold air began to fill up the room. Azula hugged her arms around herself, suppressing a shudder.

*Sozin's Comet is over...* she repeated. *Sozin's Comet is over...* She backed away from the mirror, nearly tripping over her hairbrush, and began to pace around. She willed herself to calm down with all her might. Perhaps it really was all in her head, perhaps those babbling buffoons were right...

She walked towards the window and pushed it open. She poked her head outside, looking around, but felt no wind. The comet was still there, hanging in the sky. And yet the temperature dropped by the second. Soon her skin became covered in goosebumps and she had to clench her jaw to keep it from chattering. Azula let out a breath, watching the air mist out, and rubbed her hands over her arms.

*Heavens and elements, why is it... so... cold?!*

Azula rubbed faster, scrunching up her face. She hopped from one foot to another, then began to rush around the room, huddling against pillars and into corners in search of the smallest pocket of warmth.

At last, she couldn't take it anymore. Azula inhaled, summoning up all the strength she could muster, and punched a fist at the air. There was a faint rush of energy from her knuckles and the whisper of embers as her firebending activated, but when she opened her eyes, her blood froze in its veins.

Fire had indeed come out. But instead of their usual blue color, the flames were rainbow. Tongues of blue and yellow and purple and green snaked into the air, dancing together and dissipating.

Azula jerked her hand back, fingers slackening.

"What…?"
She punched out another flame, and the same swirly fire escaped. It could have come from a child's drawing - unnaturally bright, sickeningly wispy.

Azula pulled back both hands and looked down at her palms. "What is this? What's wrong with me?"

She backed away from the spot and shot out some more flames, but there was almost no blue in sight - it had been replaced with glimmering spirals. Her latent panic surged. She made fire-whips that slapped the pillars, flame arcs from her feet that grazed the floor, but no matter what she did she couldn't get the foreign colors out.

Azula continued firebending until she was breathless, finally falling to her hands and knees. The clumps of rainbow flames she had scattered everywhere began to grow, eating their way over the room until they became a glowing forest. The commodes began turning to ash, the glass from the mirror melting, the pillars slowly sagging and crumbling at the base.

A sudden glint tugged her gaze upwards, and Azula saw Sozin's Comet appear in the window. It was also multicolored, she noticed. Blue, green, red, and purple flames shone out from its burning tail, while its body glowed white, hot to an immeasurable degree.

At that point, the picture began to blur. The flashing, whispering colors blended together into a whirlpool and faded out for blackness. Moments later Azula felt her closed eyelids tighten together, and opened them to glimpse the plain white ceiling. She was back on her floor mat.

Azula lifted herself up by the elbow. Her bedroom was exactly the way she had left it, though it had grown darker. She turned to look back at the window, and when she saw the sky, her stomach gave a lurch. It was no longer an afternoon blue, but red. The sun had set, the stars scattered in its place. How long had she been lying there? Had no one checked up on her?

Azula stumbled to flip on the ceiling lamp, still rubbing her shoulders from the residual cold. She looked over her hands and saw that they had turned blotchy, the skin under her nails purplish. She rushed to her bed and the wheelchair and began to feel all the metal surfaces.

They felt hot.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

Azula burst into the hallway. Her momentum was such that she collided with Nira, who had just come out of the lounge with an empty dinner bowl. The nurse managed to tuck it under her arm in time and caught Azula with her hands.

"Azula, you're up! Is everything all right?"

"Why did you let me sleep?" she demanded.

Nira looked bewildered. "I thought you were meditating!"

"I was freezing! It's all your fault!"

Mira poked out of the lounge in Nira's wake and came up to them. "What's the matter with her?"

"She says it's cold." Nira frowned and felt Azula's skin. "Holy cow-hog, she is cold. Azula, what's wrong? Are you sick?"

Azula pushed away from her. "I'm not sick! You're the ones who shut off the heating! You bunch of
selfish bucket-heads, you think you can just do whatever you want in here!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mira said. "The heating system has been running the same for days!"

Nira's expression was earnest as well. "We had no idea anything was wrong, Azula, we're sorry!"

Azula stared at them, the waves of her rage rising and falling in rhythm. Then out of the blue, a realization hit. Her eyes widened, pupils narrowing into tiny dots. "It's her."

Mira blinked. "What?"

"It's her! She's here! She's back again!" Azula swiveled around on her heel and sliced a hand at the air. The nurses ducked as an arc of rainbow fire hit the wall.

"Firebending!" Mira shrieked. "She's firebending!"

Azula stumbled away and ran for the back door. Her senses had heightened, every nerve in her body tensing, and all of a sudden she could feel the presence again, hovering over the entire island like a cloud. Her hands collided with the door and fumbled with the knob, then she pushed it open and ran outside.

Shouts and slams came from behind. "She's running away!"

Azula tore through the sand, feet kicking up clumps of it in her wake. She reached the shoreline and began to hurl fireballs at the air. They were still rainbow. Azula snarled and increased her frequency, to the point where the water around her feet began to sizzle. Then she stepped back and switched to making lightning, weaving the bolts through the air and shooting them upwards.

"Go away!" she shouted at the sky. "Get out of me! Leave me alone!"

Seconds later, two bodies rammed into her from behind. Azula was forced down, her chest and face pressing into the sand, and felt the heavy straitjacket drop over her with a whump. It lay atop her like a sheet of soft lead, pinning her to the ground.

Azula fidgeted in vain, clawing at the sand with her nails. A hand felt around for a spot in her neck and jabbed in a needle, and moments later she felt the surging energy inside of her dull down. The serum took her in its familiar hold, and soon Azula slumped down in exhaustion.

Hands wrapped the blanket around her in a cocoon and lifted her onto a stretcher. She was carried inside and deposited onto her bed, where the nurses began to bustle around her. Azula parted her lips and breathed a few final, flimsy flames from her mouth. The illusion had faded as suddenly as it had come - her fire was blue again.

Kira's face appeared overhead, distant and hazy.

"It was her..." Azula moaned out. "She's still here… She's making me… she made my fire..."

Kira gently tilted Azula's head to the side and did something with the needle in her neck. From the other side of the bed, Mira put a hand on her hip. "Looks like that cleansing program worked pretty well, huh?"

Kira turned her face away from the other woman, hanging her head and closing her eyes. "We need to write to Dr. Low."
"But she can't see him like this," Nira said. "Even if he comes back early, she still needs time to recuperate."

"Well she's obviously not recuperating!" Mira retorted. "It's getting worse!"

Azula writhed out against the cocoon. "She was here! She made the air cold! She made my fire change color!"

No one responded. The nurses continued to converse among themselves, and Azula groaned out in frustration. After some more fidgeting she managed to tug a hand out of the loose straps of the straitjacket. She made a frantic flame from her palm, watching tiny blue flames ignite and fizzle out.

There was a rattle by the counter as someone opened a drawer of bottles. "We're running out of needles," Nira said. "Someone go to storage."

"Didn't we dose her this morning?" Mira asked.

"It obviously wasn't enough. Look at her."

There was a rush of footsteps, then Mira came back with a fresh syringe. She filled it with a bottle of serum and tapped it, preparing it for injection.

Azula flailed away. "No! Get that muck away from me! Stop it!"

Mira fought past Azula's hand and forced the needle into her arm. She stepped back, putting a hand on her hip. Everyone waited while Azula continued to breathe blue flames from her nose and mouth, glaring up at the nurses in fury.

"Why does it seem like it's not working?" Dee asked.

All heads turned to Isla, who was standing at the back. Her eyes were sleepy. "I didn't change anything. The serum's the same as it always was."

"Well then she must be trying to wheedle out of the dosage again!" Mira said.

Azula cut them all off with a scream. "I was just checking to make sure—my—fire—was—still—blue! It had nothing to do with evading the stupid serum!"

"Why wouldn't it be blue?" Kira asked.

"It was rainbow just now!"

Dee pressed her hands to her temples. "That's it. I can't put up with this anymore. Let's stop all the nonsense with the trays and the towels and get down to solving this problem she has with her mother!"

"But she won't talk!" Nira protested. "Every time we so much as mention Ursa, she—"

"STOP IT!" Azula bellowed. "SHE WAS ABOUT TO KILL ME, DON'T YOU DARE CALL HER OVER!"

Nira closed her eyes. "That happens."

Azula continued to fidget, blowing small blue flames out through her mouth. Dee leaned over her. "How much did you give her this morning?"
"A spoonful," Mira said. "Like always."

Dee looked to Isla. "Give her another one."

Isla came over with another syringe and filled it from Mira's bottle. She slid the needle into a vein, and Kira and Dee held Azula in place for two minutes, covering her hands and mouth. But when they stepped back, Azula blew out another puff of air, creating a tongue of blue flame.

"The same thing happened in Dr. Low's office," Kira said. "Did the serum stop working?"

"I don't think so," Isla replied. "Her flames are weaker. It's still suppressing the flow of her chi on some level."

"Could she have adapted to it?" asked Dee.

Isla shook her head. "That's impossible. There's no way she could." She leaned over and began to feel several places on Azula's neck and arm. Almost immediately, her eyes widened. "I see the problem. Her chi flow is so strong I can feel it all the way down this side. There's just too much energy for the serum to handle completely. She'll have to be dosed twice as often now, with at least twice the concentration."

The other nurses balked.

"For how long?" asked Nira.

"At least until Dr. Low comes back." Isla hung her head. "But honestly, I don't know what he can do at this point…"

"Maybe we should call him back earlier," said Mira.

"But he said he's still in Port Xi," Nira responded. "He can't leave until the trays come in."

Dee slapped a hand against her side. "Well, what's more important, some trays or helping Azula out of this? She hasn't been eating from any metal trays and this still happens!"

There was a silence. At last Isla nodded her head. "I'll write to him."

Days passed. Azula lay in her bed, strapped down by the elastic bands, while time moved in an incoherent blur. The little bedside pole with the hanging pouch was back, dripping serum into her right arm. Every so often the nurses would remove it, testing her blood for dosage levels, and left her to rest. Through it all they made visible efforts to calm her down. Nira gave her sweets with her food and sang songs while she brushed Azula's hair. Kira lit candles, and Isla covered her with extra layers of blankets.

But it did nothing. Azula's dreams were fraught with cold mists and frozen oceans. She lashed out into the air with fire, but no matter how hard she tried, the coldness remained outside, the rainbow flames within.

At last, Azula couldn't take it anymore. She fidgeted around in her bed and managed to tug her left arm free of the bands. She ripped out the needle in her right elbow, plugging the spot to stop the bleeding. Then she summoned up her concentration, gathering her energy up in a wave and crashing it past the serum's feeble resistance. She made a flame from her two forefingers and began to saw with it at the bands. The material singed and smoked, and when it grew weak enough Azula pushed
her hand through and broke it. She kept going until all of the bands were released and crawled out of bed.

As soon as she ended up on her feet, a wave of dizziness caught up with her, and she had to lower herself to the floor to keep from falling over. Azula crawled towards the window, squinting against the sunlight, blindly reaching for the heating pipes. Her voice escaped her in frayed, desperate notes.

"It's so cold... I can't get warm... Help me, you squabbling, bumbling children's-book nurses!"

She grasped the heating structure with her fingers and began to rummage around, searching for a switch or a knob of any sort.

Then, in the midst of her struggles, a hand lowered itself onto her shoulder.

"Azula."

Azula froze. She turned around, gaze sweeping the room, and locked on the image of Ursa standing over her. Her mother's features were the same as ever - elegant robe, draping sleeves, and long hair. Only now her entire form was hued blue. It was as if someone had drawn her on a piece of colored paper and held her up to the light, making her partially translucent.

Azula was so horrified by the sight that she was rooted to the spot. Meanwhile Ursa leaned closer, till she was kneeling on the floor and her other arm came to wrap around Azula's shoulders in a slight embrace. Her touch was perfectly solid and warm, but her eyes seemed to be staring out at her from somewhere deep and distant. They were slightly squinted, Azula noticed, and filled with tears.

"Azula, my love, I am with you," Ursa said. "All of these illusions will pass. You must be strong. The truth was always what I told you. Your doubts are unfounded."

Her hand reached up and brushed Azula's face.

Tears welled in Azula's eyes as well and her expression contorted. "No! No, you're lying to me! You always lied!"

She started to shove Ursa's hand away. But what ended up moving and grasping Ursa's wrist was a blue, translucent arm, exactly like the woman's own. Azula paused for a breathless second and let go. She opened and flexed her palm, gaze trailing down her arm and onto her chest. The hospital jumpsuit, her hair, and her entire body below had become like Ursa was - dimmed and monotone, revealing the pattern of the floor she sat on.

Azula's heart pounded. "Wha... what's wrong with me? What did you do?"

Ursa continued to stare at her without blinking. "Help me, Azula."

"Go away!" Azula lunged at Ursa and pushed her back. "GO AWAY!"

She jumped to her feet and began to blast flames from her fists. Ursa flinched and ducked away, reaching for Azula again, but Azula pushed her back. She no longer cared about the rainbow color - she simply shot firebending forms until she couldn't any longer, torching everything that threw itself into her vision. All the while hands continued to grasp at her arms with increasing desperation, and Azula continued to slap them away, until the person she was hitting and shoving finally latched onto her with a leaden grip and pulled her down. A waking jolt coursed through Azula's body as she hit the floor, and she blinked her eyes to glimpse a real woman's face looking down at her. But instead of brown hair, hers was black. Instead of amber eyes, gray.
Isla had wrapped Azula in a bear hug as a last resort and clamped her arms against her sides. The blue of Azula's raging flames was reflected in the nurse's face, which had frozen with some striking emotion. But it didn't seem to be fear. Was it understanding?

Azula peered at the woman and felt her jaw clench. Her gaze ran across the room, where the curtains and furniture were burning in her blue flames, and her stomach sank with realization.

Isla's leaden grip loosened and became a gentle hug. Azula felt her eyes well up with tears and began to sob over the nurse's shoulder, and Isla stroked her back. "It's all right. It's all right... It's over."

From the hallway came a chorus of voices and footsteps. "We tried everything, I swear it!" Nira was saying. "We keep giving her double doses of serum, but it doesn't work! She still firebends! We did everything we could, I'm sorry!"

Seconds later the bedroom door burst open, and Dr. Low walked in. He was wearing his military uniform and a black traveling cloak, which he was in the process of unclasping. But as soon as he saw the room, his arms fell slack against his sides. His eyes skated over the smoldering mess and landed on Isla and Azula, huddled together at the center of it.

There was a silence. Then he looked askance and let out a breath. "That's going to be another tall order for the builders..."

"I didn't mean to!" Azula cried out. "I was freezing and it was the only way I could warm myself up! I wasn't trying to destroy anything!"

"I'm not blaming you." He took off the cloak and began to walk around the room, sweeping his hands over the fires. The blue flames turned red under his control, and little by little he clapped all of them out. But the damage had been done. The walls and ceiling were charred back and the window blinds had been reduced to rotted pieces of driftwood. The white bookshelf looked like it had been spattered with soil and bitten through by a beast. Her bed was also destroyed, the mattress cleaved nearly in two and the steel parts blackened. Dr. Low tried to pull it away from the wall, but when he grasped the metal bars, they deformed and bent towards him. He gazed down at the two hand-sized arcs he had made, lifting his eyebrows.

"I'll put her in mine," Isla said. "I'll sleep on the bunks."

Dr. Low nodded. "All right."

These words seared at her like knives. Azula grabbed fistfuls of her hair. "No, no, no, no!" Her chest heaved with more sobs and her face contorted.

Isla fetched a broom from somewhere and began to sweep up the ashes. Azula remained on the floor, and through her tears she glimpsed Dr. Low doing something at the sink. He had taken down a glass and was pouring something into it.

She sniffed, managing to croak out a question. "What are you making?"

"It's water." He turned to her and handed her the glass. "Drink."

Azula's eyes refocused, registering the clear liquid. She accepted the water into trembling hands and began to gulp it down. But moments after she drained the cup her dizziness returned. Her heart began to pound and her gaze flew to Dr. Low's face. "I don't know what's happening... I feel so horrible... I've never felt like this before... I feel like I'm going to die..."

"You're fine," said Dr. Low. "This is just what happens when you overexert yourself. Your body
needs to recuperate." He pulled over one of the wooden chairs, which had remained relatively undamaged, and set it before her.

Azula sat down, still shaking. "But I've overexerted myself before and it was never like this! I never felt so cold!"

"This isn't just a normal overexertion," Dr. Low said. "The problem is you never fully relaxed from your previous ones. I thought it wasn't the case, but apparently I was wrong. It turns out for all these weeks you've been continuously pouring your energy into your negative emotions, to the point where you're hallucinating. And to make things worse, you then put those negative emotions into your firebending, which causes you to drain your energy at double the rate."

"I don't firebend out of emotions! I firebend because I don't want to freeze to death or be attacked by her!"

Dr. Low rubbed his forehead. "Yes, and that's the problem. Your fear and anguish translate directly to fire. But that's not what firebenders are supposed to do. In order to be a healthy bender, you have to compartmentalize your energy reserves and fuel your bending separately from your emotions. The minute the two become muddled, you're prone to using one to sustain the other and you lose the ability to even sense that you're doing it."

Azula gritted her teeth again and grasped fistfuls of her hair. "I didn't mean to, I told you!"

"It doesn't matter whether you meant to or not; the point is, you've been doing it for over a month. Of course you'll reach a point where you have to stop."

"But what if my chi keeps draining out even when I stop? What if all of it runs dry?"

"It won't. Chi doesn't work that way."

"But I feel it! I feel myself getting weaker!" Her heart sped up in panic again and she gripped the counter with clammy hands. "I don't want to die! It's not fair!"

"You're not going to die, Azula. Drink."

"How do you know?!"

Dr. Low fixed his gaze firmly on her. "I know what dying looks like. That's not what's happening to you. Your body is merely resorting to its fight-or-flight instinct due to your perception of danger. As soon as you relax your breathing and calm down, the feeling will go away."

Azula lowered her head and swallowed. Her throat felt dry, so she gulped down more water. Dr. Low placed a hand on her shoulder and she focused her gaze on her hands, counting her breaths.

One... two...

Slowly the shaken feeling abated. In its place came a wave of lethargy, and Azula slumped against the back of the chair. Dr. Low refilled her glass and handed it to her, kicking away some stray ashes on the floor.

One by one, the other nurses poked their heads in from the hallway. Kira took a few tentative steps inside.

Isla knelt down beside Azula and felt around her neck and arm again. "Her chi is still slightly elevated," she said to Dr. Low. "Her body's still in a bending state."
Azula extended two forefingers and made a flimsy blue flame from them. Isla and Dr. Low looked towards Kira, who held up an empty bottle of serum and swished around the few drops that remained. "That's the last one."

Isla took a breath and nodded. "Then I'll do it physically." She grasped Azula's shoulders and helped her to her feet. "I'm going to block some of your meridians to halt your chi flow."

She began to tap points along Azula's arm, faintly reminding her of Ty-Lee's chi blocking. But Isla was doing it somehow differently, more controlled. The nurse continued tapping up her neck and shoulders, but there were no cramp-like pains after her contact. Instead of a leaden sluggishness sinking into her limbs, Azula merely felt an inner numbing, as if some overflowing fountain inside of her were gradually being plugged. Once Isla finished, Azula stood there for a few seconds, keeping still. Unexpectedly the heaviness in her chest eased and she began to breathe lighter.

Isla looked her over. "Better?"

Azula nodded.

"How long does it take to make the serum?" Mira spoke up.

"Three days," Isla replied.

"Then what are we going to do if it happens again?"

"It won't," Dr. Low said.

The nurses looked at him with uneasy expressions, but no one made a comment. Dr. Low turned for the door and beckoned to Azula. Azula lowered her head and followed. They all led her down the hallway, where Dr. Low opened the door to Isla's room. Isla brought out a set of fresh linens and changed the bed, while the others got her a change of clothes and other necessities.

Once the bedroom was ready, they all filed out, and Dr. Low placed his hands on Azula's shoulders.

"Go to sleep," he said. "Don't think about anything. Everything will be all right."

He left, shutting off the lights. Azula did as she was told and began to change, but even as the minutes passed she could hear movements and voices linger in the hallway. Instead of going to bed, she lowered herself onto the cold floor and pressed her ear against the door. She sat there in the dark for a while, eyes closed, listening to him and Isla talk. Just as she had listened in on a conversation between her parents, on a quiet, fateful afternoon long ago.

"I've done some thinking, but now I'm certain it's for the best," Dr. Low was saying. "I'm going to call him over."

"Are you sure you can trust him with this?" Isla asked. "How much did he tell you about himself?"

"He told me enough. And he said he'd be in Port Xi for a while. From what I see, this is the only way." A pause. "He's explained his research to me in detail already. He'll be able to help."

The hushed conversation Azula had gleaned all those years back hadn't bode well. And some old, vigilant part of her heart sensed that this one wouldn't either.
Two weeks passed before Azula calmed down enough to think clearly. The heaviness in her chest and limbs gradually lifted and her mysterious cold spells ceased. Unfortunately, the building had become a mess. Rags and bottle corks littered the floors, and the nurses stumbled about with their hair and clothes in disarray, gulping down herbal supplements to keep themselves on their feet. Isla's supplies were scattered about every corner, while the examination room in the front looked like a beast had thrown up inside of it, the counter crowded with mixing bowls and powders and pestles lying in puddles.

Azula's new accommodations weren't in much better condition. Isla's former bedroom-apothecary was now strewn with her clothes and scrolls, as well as the various medical equipment the nurses had salvaged from her ruined bedroom. Her wheelchair stood by the door in ever-present companionship, facing her with its empty seat and straps.

Azula lay in place for a while after waking up, staring in a deadpan at the ceiling. Despite the lack of a serum needle in her arm, her chi flow felt normal, but the memories of the previous days' plight were churning round in her mind, making everything bleak.

On top of that there appeared to be a commotion in the hallway. Azula could hear doors opening and numerous pairs of feet walking up and down her side of the wing. She couldn't parse a meaning from the mix of voices, but several of them were unmistakably male. That meant the ship and the construction crews were back.

She breathed a grumbling sigh and let her head sink farther down into the pillow.

Nothing happened for a good while, then finally the door to her room opened and Isla walked in with a breakfast tray. She too was visibly tired, the subtle circles that had always been there under her eyes now darker and more pronounced. She handed Azula the tray and began to brush through her hair with a comb.

"What's going on?" Azula asked.

"Dr. Low needs to talk to you," Isla replied. "He'll tell you everything."

For some reason the final sentence sounded with an exhausted, almost reluctant finality. Isla didn't say anything else.

Azula finished eating, and Isla untangled all of the knots in her hair and clipped back the jagged pieces. Then she changed Azula into fresh clothes and rolled her out in the wheelchair.

As soon as Azula poked her head into the hallway, she noticed something was off. The ship crews weren't lugging building materials – they were lugging furniture. Two of them were carrying a wooden writing desk, a third a chair, then two others came in with an assembled bookshelf. They were all headed for the back lounge to Azula's left, where other crew members were in the process of carrying out the room's regular furnishings. Over on the other end of the hallway, Mira and Nira were hurriedly mopping the floor, while Kira ran about, calling out directions in her can-do voice.

Azula's gaze stuck to them, frozen, before Isla guided the chair through another turn and they ended up in Dr. Low's room. She set the chair before his empty desk and left. Azula sat there in silence for a while, looking at his tapestry.

At last, familiar footfalls approached and Dr. Low came inside. Azula hung her head, but he
sidestepped her without reprimand and sat down.

"All right, Azula. Here is how the matter stands." He folded his hands in front of him. "I mentioned to you before that I deal with concrete things, not mysticism or fortunetelling. But given what's been happening with your hallucinations, there seems to be a strong connection between your bending and your mental state. I think it's best if we consulted someone who specializes in the spiritual side of firebending. Perhaps that might shed some light on how to best heal you. So today, you will meet a new addition to our team."

Azula's eyes pulled open all the way. "What?"

"He is a firebending specialist from the mainland. He will be giving you regular therapy sessions."

Azula closed her hands around the bars of her wheelchair. For the second time in her life, she felt the acute sensation of having a rug pulled out from right beneath her feet. "Then what will you be doing?"

Dr. Low gave a smile. "Don't worry, you're not getting rid of me that easily. I'll still be here, and I'll come to talk to you as I've always done. He'll just be another face to talk to. And his different area of expertise will be able to provide a different angle on your condition."

"I don't want to!" Azula said automatically.

"This is not about what you want. It is about what I deem appropriate for you." Dr. Low rose and took the handles of her chair.

He wheeled her into the hallway, and Azula's gaze swept over the construction crews, who continued hauling material possessions with oblivious diligence. She pounded her hands against the armrests.

"You can't do this!" she shouted. "You can't just do this! No!"

Dr. Low steered her into her old bedroom, where Isla had brought out the wooden table and was preparing tea for two. The room had been put through a speedy cleanup, the ash swept away and the burnt furniture removed. All that remained were the cabinets, counter, and the metal window shutters.

Azula's grip on the armrests remained like iron, and when Dr. Low brought her to a stop facing the empty wooden chair, she cast him a glare of pure loathing. He simply nodded once and left without responding. Isla placed the steaming tea kettle onto the center of the table, then stepped towards the door just as a gray-haired man appeared from the hallway. He was of middling height and had a thin beard, a pair of spectacles perched atop his nose. Azula looked to Isla, who responded with a resigned drop of the gaze and bowed out of the room.

Azula grimaced. She settled back in her chair, arms crossed, pointedly avoiding the man's gaze as he sat down across from her. Up close the fabric of his smock was worn and faded, and one of the wrist cuffs was smudged with ink.

"Hello, Princess Azula."

Azula did not respond. Nor was she particularly affected by the fact that this was the first time in five months that she had been called by her royal title. She found the man seedy at best, repulsive at worst. The glasses made his eyes seem vacant, and though he wasn't quite as old as he had seemed from a distance, his smile was a little too calm, a little too friendly.
The man did not respond to her lack of greeting, but inclined his head. "In case you don't know, I am not a part of this hospital's regular command. I am fairly new. My name is Professor Duan."

Azula scowled.

"I am here to help you."

She had been determined to stretch the silence until he left, but the cordial plainness of the phrase was so irritating to her ears that the words forced themselves out. "I don't want your help."

"Perhaps not at present, but eventually you may," said the man. "Let me tell you a little about myself. I am from a university on the mainland, where I study ancient legends and the bending arts. I have offered my help to Dr. Low as a consultant because I believe you to be a very interesting case."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "Explain."

The man lifted a knowing eyebrow. "You are a firebending prodigy, are you not?"

"Give me some antidote and I'll show you just how much of a prodigy I am!" She lunged forward and dug her nails into the table.

The man merely smiled. "Ah, yes, your chi-suppressant serum. Curious little concoction… Unfortunately I've been told that you are not under any circumstances to be taken off of it. So while I would indeed be very interested in seeing what you can do, I am unfortunately obligated to abide by the policy. You will continue to be administered the serum until you reach a stable mental state, whereupon you will be taught how to safely use your powers."

Azula gritted her teeth. "I can use them just fine. I wouldn't doubt that if I were you."

"I am not doubting your capabilities by any means, Princess. But I do agree with your staff that being reckless with your firebending can lead to unwanted consequences, and one should strive to avoid that as much as possible. Now if you don't mind, I would like to get to the point of why I am here. I am here because I am a specialist of two fields – firebending, as well as of the connection between humans and the spirit world."

"Those have nothing to do with each other."

"It would surprise you to learn, Princess, that they do." The man's eyes found hers and his face became momentarily grave. "I believe you've been having visions of your mother."

Azula grumbled.

"These are very significant visions, and will provide me valuable insight into your mental state if you speak openly and honestly about them."

Azula crossed her arms.

"Would you like to start?"

"Ask me a question," Azula retorted.

The man chuckled. "Well, all right. Does your mother consistently behave herself a certain way every time you see her?"

"Yes."
"And what way is that?"

"Mocking. Taunting."

The Professor wrote this down. "Is your mother a firebender?"

"No."

"Aha, interesting. But does she firebend in your visions?"

"No. I just said, she wasn't a firebender. And they're not visions, she's literally there."

"Well, to be fair, Princess, there was an occasion where you saw yourself bending rainbow flames while they actually remained blue. So what you see during these episodes doesn't necessarily line up with what is happening in reality."

Azula slumped back her head and let her eyelids droop. "So they've told you about that one already."

"Yes, Princess. I asked Dr. Low and the nurses to tell me everything they've gathered about your visions so far."

"Well, I already told you. She didn't firebend in any of my visions."

"Mhm. Thank you very much." The Professor scribbled this down. "Now. What specifically happened in each of these episodes? Do you remember?"

Azula rubbed an eye with her palm. "Ugh. I don't know. In the first one she appeared in the trees behind the building when I was outside. Then in the evening she came into the craft room and told me everything she thought about me. Which I already knew, but she likes to rub things in my face. Then the third time she pulled me through my bedroom mirror and had me chase after her into a weird forest. When I reached the end she came out of a lake and tried to pull me in. The fourth time she made my fire turn rainbow and then she turned me into one of her – she was all blue and transparent. And she makes everything cold."

She glared down at the man, expecting to see him perplexed and fumbling with his pen, but he was diligently writing, nodding along in heightened interest.

"Anything else?" he said.

"No."

The professor read over his notes – all straight lines and perfectly-printed characters. He ran a finger along his beard. "Mhm. Very interesting, Princess. Very interesting."

Azula scowled and slumped down farther.

"Now," the professor continued. "About your fire. Were you born able to produce blue flames or did the ability develop later on?"

"I got it later."

"At what age?"

"After I turned ten."

"Can you remember anything about how it happened?"
Azula crinkled her nose. "I was doing a firebending routine in the yard. Zuko and my dad were watching me. I had to demonstrate what I mastered every month or so, and my teacher came up with move sequences for me. So I did the routine. All the days I practiced I had red fire, but that day when I did it for real, I ended up making blue fire."

The professor lifted an eyebrow. "Hm. So it happened just like that?"

"I guess."

"That's interesting. What did your teacher say?"

"Nothing. I stopped firebending the minute I noticed it, because I was really surprised. And Dad and Zuko were looking at me funny. But then Master Kunyo just told me to keep going, and at the end he told my dad that I'd mastered an ability that probably no other living firebender knew."

A small smile tugged at the man's mouth. "Indeed, he was right."

Azula rolled her eyes. "Of course he was."

The man seemed to pick up on her tone and tilted his head to the side. "Does that upset you?"

Azula said nothing.

"If it does, I want you to know that there's no reason at all to feel that way. We must celebrate our abilities instead of feeling guilty about them. Or even worse, try to stifle them in an attempt to fit in with other people."

"I don't need you to tell me how I'm supposed to think."

"I'm not trying to impose anything on you, Princess, of course not. What I do think, however, is that a healthier mentality about your firebending will lead to a healthier you."

Azula narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm a master firebender and I can make lightning anytime I want. What makes you think that I have an unhealthy mentality about my firebending?"

"Well, you seem to have a negative reaction when you notice changes in your bending. Your flames turning rainbow being a case in point."

Azula snarled. "Because it's not natural! It was caused by her!"

"The production of colored flames isn't something that can be caused by someone else," the man replied. "Whatever your mother may want, your firebending is most undoubtedly beyond her control."

"That still doesn't explain why they only turned rainbow after she came."

"Perhaps the perception of her presence stirred a reaction of shock inside of you, and that shock caused your mind to produce something drastic. That's the essence of panic. And colored firebending is a perfectly common thing to dream about, just like rivers of milk or cotton clouds. But unlike rivers of milk or cotton clouds, rainbow flames are possible. And there is a difference between the mind making something up and alerting a person of a latent ability."

Azula squinted. "You're saying I can make rainbow flames?"

"Given the previous change in your flame color, I think it's highly likely that you will be."
Azula thought this over, then gave a shrug. "Fine, so I'll have rainbow fire one day. What's that supposed to do for me?"

The professor's eyes widened in surprise and he let out a chuckle. "My word, Princess! Forgive me, this is just my general befuddlement at modern firebending education, but if I had my way with those teachers... oh, boy..." He shook his head. A wave of energy seemed to surge through him, and he reshuffled his papers, straightening himself like a general about to give a speech. "Rainbow flames signal the bender's ability to produce all flavors of fire - from the coolest and most basic red to the hottest blue, all at the same time. It is the highest level of firebending and the sign of true mastery. Lightning is just a side toy for the inventive. Rainbow fire signifies the bender's ability to draw not just from their own chi, but from the chi that inhabits the sun and ultimately derives from the spirit world. It is also the fire of the dragons."

Azula's eyebrows climbed.

"So far you have managed to access one flavor in addition to red - blue fire. Moreover you appear to have done it without any conscious effort. That means it's likely that you have an innate tendency towards attaining this mastery and your visions are trying to alert you to this. In fact, my current theory is that if you work on attaining this ability, then your visions will go away." He bent over his notebook again and rubbed his beard. "But then there's also the factor of the lake in the forest. And the blue apparitions... Very, very intriguing..."

Azula rolled her eyes. "You figure it out. You're the specialist."

The man took a while to write some more things down and think them over. Finally he gave a nod. "So! I've summarized what I've gathered and I will be sharing it with Dr. Low."

Azula lowered her head and felt a bitter scowl pass over her face. "He has no idea what he's doing. And neither do you."

To her surprise, the professor breathed a sigh. "Indeed, nobody in this world does."

Azula looked at him, squinting. "Then why should I listen to you?"

A twinkle appeared in the man's amber eyes. "Clever girl you are, Princess. Very clever. Of course I acknowledge my limitations as a human being, and I am not hypocritical. I do not wish to force you to listen to me. But I hope that you will. After all, we're constantly choosing whom to listen to and whom to disregard in our day-to-day doings. My hope is to convince you that my ideas can be of some worth to you, and that you won't simply discard them as you move on with life."

"Whatever."

"So, we'll call it a day for now, Princess?"

Azula looked away.

The professor seemed to understand that much at least. He rose, gave a parting bow, and left the room.

Azula sat in place for a while, staring at the empty space where her bed used to be. Then came a flash of dark hair as Nira poked her head in. She walked in with careful steps and set down a bowl of colorful vegetable rice onto the table. Azula's gaze trailed up to find hers.

The nurse smiled uncertainly. "So how did it go?"
"I hate him," Azula replied.

Nira's smile dipped down without much resistance. She said nothing.

Time came for physical therapy and Nira rolled Azula into the hall. It was still a mess - the construction crews had now switched to moving wagons filled with boxes, and the wheels were tracking sand all over the floor. The boxes were filled with smaller items: clothes, scrolls, ink sets. Mira and Kira hobbled after them with still more boxes, while Isla and one of the night people pushed in a cart of books.

There was no room in Dee's office anymore, so Azula did her exercises in the craft room, hidden in a corner behind a wooden divider. The other nurses had lunch on the other side in the meantime, and Azula listened to their conversations as they heated up their food and drinks with firebending.

"... And I thought the bunks were cramped before... Now I have to climb to my bed like some kind of animal."

"It's better than having to sleep with those stupid fake plants all around you."

"And of course we'd have to keep dried food in the freaking bathroom."

"Guess that's the guy's definition of 'a few things'."

"Tell me about it..."

Later that day, Azula snuck out of her bedroom and tiptoed down the hallway. The door to the former back lounge stood ajar, revealing what was now a makeshift study. The fake plants and vases had been removed for bookshelves, and the floor was covered with an elegant red carpet.

The writing desk and chair had been placed facing the far window, and the Professor sat there, writing diligently. He was so absorbed in what he was doing that Azula was able to take a few steps inside. She swept her gaze around the walls, which now had strange scrolls hung up, featuring firebending forms and spirit-like creatures. His books were dust-free and organized by topic: spirits, firebending, the spirit world... Already a jumble of them had amassed itself on a worktable to the side, and Azula looked at the open pages, glimpsing pictures of lion-turtle things, misty landscapes filled with boulders, and two circling koi fish.

"Lia the Guardian," Zuko repeated. "Keeper of the Rift, daughter of the Moon and Ocean."

He looked up from the book, meeting the gazes of Aang and Suki. The three of them were sitting in one of the palace gardens, in a warm patch of sunlight by the trees. Suki reclined in the grass in her Kyoshi dress, while Aang was perched atop a boulder, both of their faces pensive. Zuko laid down the Book of Spirits face-up for them to see, and Aang cast his gaze upwards in thought.

"Lia the Rift Guardian..." Aang tapped his chin. "I've never heard of her. To tell you the truth, the monks never really taught me a lot about the different kinds of spirits. I only learned what I know from Roku. He told me about Koh, and Koh told me about Tui and La. But I never knew they had a daughter."

"And all this stuff about the rift sounds weird," said Suki. "I had no idea things worked that way."
"Neither did I," Zuko replied. "But then again, I don't know a whole lot of people who've been to
the spirit world. My uncle has, but he never really talked about it..." He looked to Aang.

The boy tilted his head to the side. "Well, I don't remember crossing any seas when I went to the
spirit world. I guess every time I went, I sort of just... popped in. But what that sage said makes sense
to me. I know that Tui and La were the first spirits to cross over. So they had to have built a bridge of
some sort to keep the connection between the worlds."

Suki leaned over to examine the page again. "It doesn't look like a Water Tribe drawing, though. It
looks like…"

"A Fire Nation drawing," Zuko finished. "That's because it is. But it's ancient - Lia must have been a
cultural object hundreds of years ago. Well, then eventually the Fire Nation lost touch with its
spiritual roots, so it's obvious why no one would know now."

"So the ancient people of the Fire Nation worshipped a waterbender spirit?" Suki said. "That almost
sounds... strange."

"But it makes sense," Zuko said. "The rift's everywhere, and from what Khufu told me, Lia was
known to have been sighted in all four nations. So it's reasonable that different cultures would have a
concept of her."

Aang's face brightened. "And it's not like Tui and La only influence waterbenders either. The Moon
and Ocean are important for the rest of the world just as much."

Suki pondered this. The peaceful silence of the palace garden settled back in for a few moments,
only the chirping of birds and rustling of tree branches sounding from up above. The book lay open
in the grass in the meantime, and Zuko looked back down at the drawing of the spirit, sinking into
thought.

"The only thing is, I'm positive I've heard her name before. But can't for the life of me figure out
where." He rubbed his temples. "Lia…"

"Did you read it in a book?" Suki asked.

"No, no, I heard it... Someone was saying it..." Zuko shook his head. "Anyway, Khufu said that if
the rift continues to thin, then there'll be consequences. Either she'll get angry, or rogue spirits might
break through into our realm, and it won't be pretty for us either way."

"What did he mean by rogue spirits?"

"He means the dark spirits," Zuko said. "Basically, the spirit world is divided into two realms - the
realm of darkness and the realm of light. Light is the one that everyone sees when they first cross
over. It represents order and harmony. The dark realm represents chaos. So the spirits that live there
have the nature to disrupt harmony instead of preserving it. And when there's lots of chaos in the
mortals world, they become stronger. They start invading the realm of the regular spirits, and from
there it's only a short journey to the rift, where they can start worming their way through to the
material world. The thinner the rift is, the less of a protection we have against them. And
unfortunately the rift hasn't thickened a bit since the last solstice. It's getting thinner."

Suki winced.

"But why?" asked Aang.

"The sages said it's because of the war," Zuko said. "And honestly, I think they're right. War's about
as chaotic as you can get, and ours lasted for a whole century. We might've stopped things from getting worse by ending it, but think about how much energy the dark spirits have gotten already."

Aang hopped down from the boulder. "Then we have to do something about it. I'll go into the Spirit World and ask what's going on. Maybe I'll even be able to talk to Lia."

Zuko hung his head. "Actually, there might be a problem with that."

"Why?"

"Khufu said she's malevolent."

Aang's eyebrows shot up. "Malevolent?!"

Suki looked perplexed as well. "But she's a guardian of balance. Doesn't that mean she's concerned with, well, good stuff?"

Zuko sighed. "That's the thing. Her job is to keep the rift in balance, and she doesn't hesitate to eliminate anything she thinks is harmful to it. If she sees someone doing something that defies order, or even trespassing in a place where they don't belong, she sucks them into the spirit world and traps them there forever. She's been known to cause weather disasters to punish people, and there are even records in the Catacombs of how entire villages starved out because her storms ruined their harvests. She doesn't like talking to people, and she's even a bit distant from other spirits."

Aang and Suki balked.

"But I thought Tui and La were good," Suki said. "If she's their daughter, wouldn't she have good in her too?"

Aang seemed troubled as well. "Yeah, that can't be true. She's probably just upset that the boundary is constantly being violated. I mean, the war lasted for a hundred years and it threw the world completely off-balance. I'm sure we can get her to see that things can change."

"I hope so," said Zuko.

Suki took the book into her hands and thumbed back to the introductory page. "Who's Atem Ra, anyway?"

"The first Fire Lord," Zuko replied. "He was the leader of the Fire Sages, then he united the warring peoples of the islands and founded the empire."

Suki's eyebrows climbed. "Whoa. Your family goes back all that time?"

"Well, it wasn't just my family. There were different dynasties," Zuko scratched his head as he thought back. "But I'm pretty sure my family's related to him directly... I remember one of Azulon's ministers saying something."

"Huh. That's interesting."

Meanwhile, Aang strode away from them and sought out at patch of grass in the sun. "I'll meditate and see if I can talk to Lia."

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" Zuko said.

Aang smiled. "Hey. I've been crossing back and forth from the spirit world for thousands of years. Maybe she can trap regular people, but she can't trap me."
Suki gave a thumbs-up. "That's the spirit."

Aang stopped beside a nondescript spot and sat down. He closed his eyes, pressing his fists together so that his arrow tattoos connected, and his body went still.

Zuko and Suki both drew closer to him out of reflex, though Zuko knew there was little they could do to help him. Once Aang's mind was unhinged, his body was left an unfeeling, unhearing sculpture. Nor was there any way of telling what was happening to him in the other realm – one moment Aang could be sitting calmly, and the next he could open his eyes in the Avatar State and rise up with a giant black fish-monster.

They sat there in the grass for a while. Suki began to peel apart a grass blade, and Zuko sat with his legs crossed, chin resting on his fist, still casting glances at Aang.

Minutes passed in silence, and Zuko started to make himself comfortable, but then out of the blue Aang's eyes flew open and the boy jumped to his feet. "AAAAH!"

Zuko was up in an instant, hands flying into a firebending pose. "What is it? What happened?"

Aang rattled his head from side to side as if to clear a storm of hornets. Suki had drawn a fan in panic as well, but Aang looked more weirded out than mortally terrified. "It was crazy! I've never seen anything like it before!"

"Was it Lia?" Suki asked.

"No, they were spirits! Everywhere! I could hardly take a step - they all kept bumping into me and jumping up trees and... Eeehhh!" Aang shuddered as his gaze went to a tree branch, but it was only a bird preening its feathers. He began to dust off his shirt. "A bunch of them even started jumping up me, and they were all screaming at me, 'Run, run!'"

Zuko and Suki exchanged bewildered glances.

Aang grasped the sides of his head and began to pace around. He plopped back down onto the boulder, laying his glider across his lap. "It was so weird. They all felt... genuinely panicked about something. And there were so many of them. It's like they were all trying to get away from the same thing."

"What could they possibly be trying to run away from?" asked Zuko. "What would scare a spirit?"

Suki turned out her palms. "A bigger spirit?"

Aang lowered his head. "Or something that threatens their livelihood. Seriously threatens it."

Zuko was silent.

"I think whatever the Sages are saying is right," Aang said. "Something's in the realm of light that shouldn't be. And if we don't do something about it, it could affect the mortal world."

"But what are we supposed to do?" asked Suki.

"We have to find Lia. It's the only way."

"How?"

Aang pondered this. "I know that most spirits have a preferred dwelling... Maybe there's a place where Lia lives normally when she's not traveling or hunting people."
Zuko's thoughts switched into gear and he mechanically moved to pick up the book. "I'll see what else the Catacombs have. The sages and I are trying to get back all the spiritual books that got banned during my father's reign. Maybe we'll find one that's helpful."

Aang gave a nod. "All right. I'll do some thinking too. I bet one of my past lives knows something."

"Come to think of it, I could write to Sokka too," Suki said. "Maybe one of his tribe's elders knows about Lia. And if they have any scrolls, he and Katara could bring them when they come back."

Zuko blinked dumbly for a moment, not processing what she had said. "Come back? But they've hardly been in the South Pole for three months. Why would they leave again so soon?"

Suki balked. Aang put his hands on his hips and leaned forward playfully. "Did his Fire Majesty forget his birthday?"

The realization hit Zuko like a slap. His shoulders drooped and he let out a laugh. "Oh. Right. Three weeks..."

"Something tells me you need a break, Mr. Fire Lord," said Suki.

Zuko waved a hand in dismissal, a smile breaking through his expression. "Yeah, yeah, I get it." He stepped back towards the stone pathway. "I'll see you guys later."

Suki and Aang were still looking at him with a mix of humor and concern. Zuko tucked the book under his arm, then with a final parting wave to them, he headed back into the palace.

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His feet carried him through the middle wings, past halls of dusty bedchambers and studies and down the hall of Fire Lord portraits. All the while his thoughts churned, the ever-present task list in his mind amending with new information, priorities reshuffling.

Zuko had nearly reached the exit when he glimpsed someone standing behind the row of pillars. It was a black-haired girl in a dark red dress. Recognizing her, Zuko lifted his eyes in surprise and slowed to a stop. "Mai?"

Mai turned around, and at the sight of Zuko her mouth spread into a smile. "Zuko." She approached and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" Zuko asked. "I thought you'd only be coming next week."

"Well, now that my dad works here, I guess I have an excuse." She smiled slyly and stroked back a strand of hair that had come loose from his topknot. "You gave him a really nice office. I can tell he's happy."

"Not tired like before?"

"No. He's doing a lot better." Then Mai's face fell somewhat and she leaned her head against his shoulder. "Apparently he's been talking to a lot of nobles from South Chung-Ling. Now he suddenly wants to send Tom-Tom to school there."

Zuko lifted an eyebrow in puzzlement. "Not to Capital City anymore?"

Mai shook her head. "Nope."

"Why?"
"I don't know, something about it being the new it-school for politics."

Zuko lifted her chin with his hand and jokingly narrowed his eyes at her. "Oh, I see, so the Royal Fire Academy for Boys isn't good enough anymore?"

But Mai remained pensive and breathed a sigh. "It's just he way he is when he gets obsessed with work. He gets a bunch of nonsense into his head and starts telling us about the 'right' way to do things, even down to how we live our lives. When he doesn't work so much it's not bad. But when he has a lot to do, especially when he starts spending time with those palace people all day, it's like he becomes a completely different person."

Zuko's gaze lingered on her in curiosity. Mai brushed it off moments later with a shake of the head. "But whatever. Mom'll talk him out of it. I definitely don't want Tom-Tom in a different city all by himself."

Zuko couldn't resist a smirk. "And here I remember you saying you wished whatever eagle-stork had dropped him off would take him back."

This caused Mai to chuckle. "Well, that was when he was on my bad side. He made it off."

"Lucky kid."

They stood in silence for a moment, Zuko hugging Mai close and Mai reclining on him in contentment. Zuko's gaze skimmered over the portraits. "It's weird how there are only fifty here," he remarked. "There've been many more Fire Lords than that."

Mai yawned. "They all look the same to me. One angry old guy after the other."

Zuko turned her around slightly and pointed at a painting to the left. "That was Fire Lord Zoren. He was the twelfth. And there were four in between here that got torn down." He pointed to the space between him and the next one.

"Why?" Mai asked.

"Well, early Fire Lords had the habit of burning portraits and relics from rivaling dynasties. Historical preservation really only came about with Lan, the forty-sixth." Zuko pointed to a spot farther back. "So basically, the six hundred or so years before him that the empire existed are ashes. Six hundred years of the palace's history, just gone."

Mai met his gaze and traced a hand along his collar. "Zuko, why does it matter? You're Fire Lord now. Stuff that happened six hundred years ago probably doesn't have anything to do with today anyway. Think of the future."

Zuko looked down at the book that was still tucked under his elbow. "I don't think it's possible to go into the future if you're ignorant of your past. Keeping the past locked up or burning it isn't the answer. And I made myself a vow as Fire Lord that I'd never do that."

"But you can't be obsessed about the past either. You've been spending every day in those catacombs. It's not healthy."

"It's my job, Mai," Zuko said.

Something glinted behind Mai's eyes as she narrowed them. "Zuko, I watched my dad work a job like that for years and it turned him into a shadow of himself. I don't want the same thing happening to you."
Zuko was unable to respond. A part of him knew she was right... but another knew he couldn't afford to listen.

He adjusted his grip on the Book of Spirits and stepped away. "It won't happen. You'll have to trust me."

Mai said nothing.

Zuko approached her again and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll see you later."

Mai pressed a gloved hand to the spot, holding it there. She lifted her gaze to Zuko, then turned and walked off without a word.

Zuko continued out of the portrait hall and exited from the front of the palace. He went to the Dragonbone Catacombs, where he exchanged nods with Khufu, greeted some other sages, and went into his study.

What no one noticed was a junior sage slip out of the Catacombs moments later and set off towards the palace.

…

The office of the Fire Lord's grand secretary was located in the frontmost wing. It was a large room dominated by red and gold, with carved trimmings on the ceiling and a hanging candle lamp. Five tall windows along the wall provided daylight, while Ukano sat at his glossed wooden desk, stamping the palace's official announcements and decrees with his seal. His new clothes also told of a higher standing, robes made of fine silk and a small flame clip adorning his topknot. An official ink portrait of Zuko hung on the wall behind him.

Ukano worked for several minutes, rolling papers up into tubes and binding them with wax seals. Then came a knock on his door and his servant entered.

"Sir, there's a visitor for you."

"Send him in," Ukano said.

The servant withdrew and brought in an elderly Fire Sage. The man walked to the center of Ukano's carpet and bowed. "Your Excellency."

Ukano's eyebrows lifted in surprise. He waved the servant out and fixed his gaze on the man, clad in solid red robes and a tall hat. "Fire Sage. Is something the matter?"

The man took a few tentative steps forward. "My name is Sao, Your Excellency. Something… something of importance to me within the palace has been misplaced and it is my wish to see the wrong righted again.

A chill settled into Ukano at the sound of those familiar words. His hand itched towards a stray piece of string and he looked the sage in the eye. "It is indeed regretful that much is still undetermined within the palace. Is your issue a kind that can be resolved by waiting?"

The sage shook his head. "I believe I've waited too long already. I require a man of letters. If we could speak in private, I would be endlessly grateful."

That was the final phrase. Ukano's tension dissipated and he rose from his seat. "Come."
He spread out his arm and guided the sage through a back door, which led to a private inner chamber. This room was furnished more modestly and was well out of earshot.

Ukano motioned the sage towards the couch and locked the door.

"You are the first such visitor I have gotten in this post," Ukano said. He took a seat close by in an armchair. "I trust you have looked out for your safety?"

"I have, Your Excellency. The Fire Lord spends his days and nights in the Dragonbone Catacombs and I left just a few minutes after he arrived."

"I hope you know that's not enough. We may have increased in number, but we're far from strong in the capital. And now that I've received this position, I have to exercise even more caution."

The sage inclined his head. "I understand, Your Excellency. I come to you humbly with full knowledge of your collective's policies and of the importance of your endeavor."

Ukano laid a hand on his shoulder. "Then speak, my friend."

The sage fixed his gaze on the ceiling trimmings for a while, expression uneasy. At last he took a breath. "Your Excellency, there has been a heavy weight on my conscience ever since the coronation. I have scourged the histories and decrees within the Dragonbone Catacombs, and not once has there been a Fire Lord who had not ascended due to the previous ruler's death or abdication. Zuko has broken the heavenly law spoken by the first Fire Lord. He does not have the divine mandate to rule, and I fear that if this state of affairs is allowed to continue, the Fire Nation will face punishment from the cosmic forces."

"You are absolutely right," Ukano replied. "And I assure you, you are far from the only person who's come to this conclusion."

"Something must be done, Your Excellency, but I am completely at a loss for a solution. And I dare not express my views to my fellows – the Great Sage Khufu and the others have sworn themselves to Zuko. Investigating his legitimacy is the last thing on their minds."

"Yes, that is the plight of the palace worker," Ukano said. "Being discreet while at the same time trying to imbue your companions with the truth. But don't be hard on yourself. Even for us the realization was a gradual one, and it definitely couldn't have been reached by the efforts of only one man."

He rose to pace around, and the Fire Sage followed him with his gaze.

"The problem is that the law became... complicated after Ozai named himself the Phoenix King," Ukano said. "It was a move that had no precedent in the empire's history. His goal was to remake the Earth Kingdom into a Fire Nation territory, following with the Water Tribes. These territories would be governed by sub-rulers who would stand on equal ground and report to him, the supreme monarch. Importantly, Princess Azula would have stepped up to become the next Fire Lord. But the princess was never crowned. Nor was Ozai's world monarchy ever created. Therefore, in the purely objective eye of the law, Ozai retains the title of Fire Lord to this day. The person Zuko should have defeated in an Agni Kai for the throne is Ozai."

The sage nodded. "Indeed, Your Excellency."

"Unfortunately, the populace is drunk on peace," Ukano continued. "They either blindly accept the rhetoric that Zuko and the Avatar spoonfeed to them, or they fulfill this pseudo-Fire-Lord's wishes out of a sense of helplessness. If the circumstances were less dire, my fellows and I would simply
make a peaceful demand that Zuko challenge Ozai publicly and settle the matter once and for all. If
the boy wishes to ascend, let him do so with honor, not through trickery. But conveniently, the
Avatar took Ozai's firebending. Almost too conveniently."

The sage's eyes widened. "Are you suggesting that the Avatar and Zuko plotted all of this in
advance?"

"I am almost certain of it. Moreover, Zuko has disposed of Princess Azula. He says she has been sent
away, but no one knows where. If she is alive, then we have no information about what condition
she is in, and if she were to be killed, then no one would ever find out. Meanwhile Zuko is
repopulating the imperial court as fast as he can and imposing his policies over the entire continent."

"The policy of peace, you mean?"

"Not just peace - repayment. 'Restoration of harmony', as he calls it. Simply put, it's a program where
the Fire Nation lends out its money and material resources to help the other nations restore
themselves."

The sage rested his chin on his knuckles as he thought this over.

"The logical question to ask is where do these compensations stop?" Ukano said. "How much of our
food and labor is to be exported to the rest of the world before we can be left to our own devices
with a clear conscience? Unfortunately, Zuko hasn't given an answer. But the Avatar has – the
Avatar has stated that an essential aspect of restoring balance is for the people of the four nations to
work together again, as they were meant to do for all of eternity. In other words, the Fire Nation is to
be the world's handmaiden and provider permanently, so that it will be reduced from a sovereign
state to a cog in a global machine. The world empire will still be created, only it will be one
controlled by the Avatar."

The Fire Sage frowned. "But surely peace is a good thing! And the Fire Nation has wrongs to right,
prisoners to release. Surely we can do that without forsaking the Fire Nation's autonomy."

"You are right. But our Fire Lord and the Avatar believe that we cannot. Now, I'm no enemy to
peace - in fact few among us are. But I am an enemy of turning our nation into the world's servant,
and an enemy to a Fire Lord who would unconditionally do what the Avatar tells him, even if it
defies the will and wellbeing of his people. He parades around the capital and poses before average
citizens with his friends as if he's not even one of us. Everywhere he goes he has that Air Nomad at
his side and echoes everything he says."

"And this process he calls harmony restoration, is it already underway?"

"I'm afraid so. Currently Fire Nation forces are shipping food and supplies to help rebuild the
Southern Water Tribe. But they are not simply helping the tribesmen get back on their feet, no. They
are offering to bring tribesmen to the Fire Nation to work, letting them settle in Fire Nation towns,
and even giving them our ships and air balloons for free as a means of transportation. The same thing
is happening with cities on the coasts of the Earth Kingdom. I've had to sign and seal many of the
official announcements myself. The effects for now are small, but in a few years, it will be too late to
stop them. And I shudder to think what will happen when the Earth Kingdom chooses a new
monarch – likely he or she will make even more demands of us, and this puppet Fire Lord will bow
to them."

"What action are your fellows planning to take?"

"A sufficient measure would have been imprisonment... But in that case, the Avatar would most
likely release him and begin the cycle anew. So there is only one possible answer." Ukano looked
the sage in the eye. "We must kill Zuko."

There was a pause, then the sage lowered his head. "It is no light matter to speak of… But I concede. I
see no other way."

Ukano rose from the couch and paced away, momentarily becoming a silhouette as he faced the
window.

"But whom do you have in mind for a replacement?" the sage continued. "The throne cannot be
empty, not even for a day!"

"The general consensus right now is Ozai," Ukano answered. "And in my opinion, that's our only
choice. We must restore our rightful Fire Lord to his place and ask him how we ought to proceed
from there."

The sage nodded, almost to himself. "I suppose that is wisest. Having a nonbender as a Fire Lord is
less than ideal, but so long as Ozai lives and does not crown an appointed successor, the throne is
rightfully his."

"Not to mention, he is a capable ruler," Ukano said. "He always dealt well with difficult situations
and knew how to place the right people into the right positions. Perhaps he will even appoint the
princess to rule in his stead, and then we will be able to focus our energies on finding her. But we
must hear Ozai's word first. Without it, all other voices are meaningless."

"Indeed."

Ukano went to a desk that stood by the wall and opened a drawer. He unlocked a secret bottom
compartment, taking out a clean scroll and a stamp.

"I will give you a paper with my mark," he said. "The flyers have been compromised, so we aren't
making any more of them. But my fellows have told me that we've amassed enough allies already. I
will write to my friend in South Chung-Ling. He has survived the interrogations as well and will
inform me when it is time to take action."

Ukano wrote the sage's name, signed his, and stamped the paper. He handed the scroll to the sage.

"For now, return to your post, Sage Sao. Be at peace, for you are setting the Fire Nation on the right
path."

The sage inclined his head. Ukano guided him out and saw him off with a cordial bow.

Once he was left alone, he withdrew to the private room again and penned a letter, using a ciphered
code only he and a second person knew.

Esteemed Tao Yu,

I now have sufficient authority and trust of the Rogue Dragon at my disposal. All rally meetings
within the vicinity of the Capital have been a success and I have given the order for our allies to
hibernate until the season to strike is upon us.

Attached I have included the list of some new recruits that have approached me in the previous
month. Please hand them to our friend General M so that he may take them under his protection.

May the great Fire Spirit give you continuing energy and fortune.
Tao Ran.

He sealed the letter and sent it off with his private messenger hawk.

Days later he got the reply.

Esteemed Tao Ran,

All is well. The beginning stage is complete. I am now preparing for my journey to Capital City.

As we met all those months ago that evening during the Autumn Festival, we shall meet again on the upcoming Holiday.

Ever your friend,

Tao Yu.

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