Book 4: Light and Darkness

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Summary

The 100 year war was over, but why did it feel like that was only the beginning? Years after Sozin's Comet, an ancient enemy awakens, one who holds a grudge against the Avatar. Lies will be exposed and truths revealed. The Gaang and Azula unite to stop this dire threat. They seek to not only achieve peace for the world, but for themselves as well. AU! Zutara Dark! Aang
Chapter 1

This is my first fanfiction. Leave a review and tell me what you think. This will be an eventual Zutara and Azula/Aang. This is an AU! Changes from Canon will occur!

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The Fire Nation.

For over a century, since the dawn of the Great War, that nation had been uttered in fear, and even terror and hate. Fire Lord Sozin's vision of a world of only Fire had brought pain and strife to everyone, some more than others, and no matter how much time passed, people did not simply cease to remember. His descendant, his own great-grandson, Fire Lord Zuko had worked endlessly ever since the reappearance of Sozin's Comet to relieve the fear and show the other nations that the Fire Nation was serious about a lasting peace.

But contempt for the Children of Fire ran deep in the souls of many, coiled in the deepest recesses of their vengeance-filled hearts.

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A servant kneeled exactly three feet behind the Fire Lord's sitting form, "Here is the bread you requested, my liege."

The Fire Lord didn't react, and the servant was afraid that he had somehow displeased his sovereign, but after several tense seconds, the Fire Lord motioned him closer. The servant humbly jumped to his feet and journeyed towards Agni's chosen ruler, refusing to look into the face of the Fire Lord because, to do such, would be a sign of great disrespect to his sovereign, a crime punishable by death.

"You are dismissed," the Fire Lord's dismissal gave the servant the reprieve he was seeking. With his head still bowed, he quickly scurried away as respectfully as possible.

After grabbing the bread from the servant, Zuko held it in his palms, staring at the pond, at the Turtle Ducks. Multiple chirps erupted from the creatures' beaks and they swam closer, smelling the bread. Zuko smiled softly and tore off small pieces, dropping them into the pond. The Turtle Ducks acted like fire itself consuming the broken pieces within seconds, and he tossed more flakes into the pond, watching with fond amusement as the animals squabbled amongst themselves.

Eight hard and long years had passed since Sozin's Comet blazed through the sky, bathed the heavens with its red glow. At the beginning of his reign, Zuko had honestly thought that life would become easier, but he had been wrong, so greatly wrong. His father had made a disaster of the Fire Nation's economy and it had taken Zuko almost three years to clean it up. His uncle was a huge help, the best that he could have ever asked for. They would often write letters concerning the various topics and his uncle's sage advice was the main reason why Zuko was able to turn his nation's economy around so quickly, and the only reason that his temper hadn't threatened to raze the Caldera.

Months had been spent tirelessly reviewing everything that his father had done and upon completion, Zuko had realized that he would have to clean house. It had been worse than imagined, and he had quickly and vigorously gotten to work. All of his father's advisors and top
military personnel were relieved from their duty. Any type of rebellion would have been treason and thus, execution and swift land and financial takeover by the Dragon's Throne. Luckily, Zuko had only had to order the deaths of a few of the old bitter and wretched hags.

Once all of his father's advisors and top generals had been either executed or forcefully relieved, he had quickly began putting heavy resources into finding his mother. And every time when Zuko visited his father's prison cell, the once-Phoenix King had been no help and had seemed cruelly amused every time Zuko had questioned him. After months had passed with no leads as to where her his mother was, Zuko had fiercely contemplated torturing his father for the information. He had signed the order several times, only to immediately set it alight with his fire because every time, nausea had threatened to overwhelm him; he had been told more than once that he was truly his father's son in his life, but he didn't want to be like his father, not at all. If he did torture his own father, he would essentially become Ozai reborn, and the thought was enough to stay his hand.

His uncle's advice must have been a gift from Agni himself, because after he had come so close to actually ordering his father's torture, he had actually stumbled upon his mother by pure happenstance.

It was quite surprising, actually, frighteningly similar to the time when he had stumbled upon his uncle bathing, the memory of retching ever-present. Zuko had sent his agents everywhere to try and pick up his mother's trail, but after each time, they would return with nothing to report. They were discouraging and after he had almost succumbed to the desire to torture his father, Zuko haddonned his Blue Spirit guise, venting his poisonous frustrations on some of the criminals in the Fire Nation.

Imagine his surprise when he had literally run into her in an alley in the middle of the night.

He had been in the Eastern Province looking to relieve his irritation on criminal scum when he had glimpsed a graceful figure dart into an alley. Thinking it to be a thief, Zuko had jumped off the roof and landed soundlessly in front of the figure, causing – who he noticed to be a woman – to stumble back in shock. He had loomed over her, and now looking back, his mother must have thought that he was going to rape her.

Their eyes had then locked – golden versus golden hidden behind a mask! – and he had frozen in place, hysteria threatening to burst through his mind in a shockwave of lightning. He had recognized those golden eyes, he had known those eyes. It had been fourteen years since he had glimpsed those golden orbs, but Zuko had always remembered how those eyes would sparkle at him when he had laughed in childish delight.

The woman was his mother, his missing mother, the Dowager Fire Lady of the Fire Nation. During those moments, he hadn't moved, petrified that she would vanish before his very eyes like a delicious smoke after a crackling fire. He had watched unblinkingly as his mother's eyes narrowed in determination and anger, and she had then smoothly adjusted her stance, firing a hot blast of flames from her fist, followed by another from her foot in rapid succession.

It had only been Zuko's quick reflexes, which were borne from years of intense training, that he had managed to deflect the blow with his forearm, and with his other arm, bat the flaming-kick away at the last second. The show of incredible skill had done nothing to deter his mother, though, quite the opposite, actually. She had come after him over and over, blasting fire at him tirelessly, bearing a remarkable resemblance to Azula.

Zuko had finally had enough and tore off his mask. It had fluttered to the ground, catching his mother by surprise, but she hadn't stopped her attack. He had then caught her incoming fist in his
hand, snuffing out the bright flames that had been headed straight for his already-scarred face. Upon finding her hand trapped, his mother had instinctively raised her gaze to meet his.

A breath had escaped out of her lips in a rush, blood draining from her face so rapidly that Zuko had been concerned she would faint. After another second, Zuko had let go of her hand and it fell limply to her side. His mother had blinked and swallowed, her lips parting in amazement and wonder and disbelief. "Zuko?" It had been whispered so quietly that he had almost missed it.

"Mom," he had whispered in confirmation. Tears had then welled in her golden eyes, beginning to spill down her cheeks, falling to the ground with the force of large boulders. She had looked so uncertain, as if she hadn't known what to do, and Zuko had then quickly made the decision for her, pulling her into his chest, wrapping her arms around her tightly, embracing her for the first time in over fourteen years.

His mother had tensed in shock, but soon, her arms wrapped around his own back, squeezing tightly, hysterically, fingers clawing at his shirt in desperation. "Oh, Zuko, my beautiful baby boy," she had choked out, shirt becoming wet from the force of her tears.

Tears had begun to seep out of his good eye and his composure had evaporated. Together, they had fallen to their knees, clutching one another. With a riot of emotions threatening to overwhelm him, he had finally managed to speak. "Come on," he had squeezed her tighter, almost afraid that she would disappear from his life again. "It's time for you to come home, mom."

It had taken a lot of convincing from Zuko, but Ursa had finally agreed to return to the palace. She had confessed that she had been too ashamed to return, especially since Ozai was still alive, and something about his grandfather, but Zuko had dismissed her concerns, citing truthful facts that would put her at ease. Then, after Zuko had held a Royal Banquet in her honor, she had demanded that he take her to visit Azula. In spite of wanting his sister and mother to reconnect, Zuko had hesitated. He himself visited his sister every day, because, no matter what she had done when she was Ozai's enforcer, he loved her, he always had and always would.

He had honestly not known how his mother would react upon seeing her once-loving daughter locked up, and that didn't even involve Azula's reaction. His sister was comfortable with his presence, especially since he had confessed many of the ways that he had resented her growing up. She, in turn, had then begun to finally open up about the… abuse she had suffered from Ozai after their mother had left, details that Zuko had never known about, details that enraged him so much that he had ordered several executions of his father's like-minded advisors.

Zuko had hoped that, just maybe, they would forgive one another, because despite what she would claim, his sister had changed, but Azula had always been unpredictable, even after her mind had finally begun to heal, and it had been no thanks to Aang's suggestion.

Eventually, after hearing his best friend's advice, Zuko had dismissed the chi blockers from his sister's room to give her an incentive to reach towards after a year since her imprisonment. Aang had written to him, reasoning that if Azula had her Fire, it would cause her to heal faster because his sister had always thrived under goals being put before her. She had actually smiled a true smile at him when he had announced it, shock carved into her features when he had also announced that it had been the Avatar's idea, and she hasn't caused any trouble with her firebending since then. Yet. She had reverted back to the Azula from his childhood – a cunning, mischievous, and prank-creating sister - and Zuko was more than pleased, but every time when their mother was brought up, Azula would go stock still and order him to leave.

Zuko hadn't wanted ruin the great leaps forward that she had taken, but his mother had dismissed his concerns. He had relented and begrudgingly taken her to see Azula, and the results had been about what he expected.
Azula's voice had greeted them upon entering her room, "You've already visited me today, Zuzu. Do you need me for something?"

Zuko had clenched his jaw, knowing that the good mood his sister was in would evaporate once his mother entered. "I brought someone here to see you," he had said warily.

He had seen Azula raise a brow, "Is it the Royal seamstress? Because, if it is her, then it's about time. I am relieved that you finally see that I've earned the right to have better colors in my room other than just plain old white. It's been far too depressing in here for far too long, big brother." Even though she had changed and had mostly healed mentally, some things would always be the same.

Zuko had sighed and prayed that this would not blow up in his face; but he knew it was hopeless. "I found her," he hadn't needed to say more. He knew that she would understand, and she did. After several moments of staring at him incomprehensively, her eyes widened and her lips had parted in shock.

"Azula?" Their mother's voice had then drifted through the doorway and Zuko turned to face her while Azula turned away, features pale.

Although he had wanted to interfere, Zuko had known that this was something that both his mother and sister needed to do for themselves. Both women had stood silently, one staring and the other ignoring. It had been so quiet, and Zuko had half-expected it to remain that way forever.

After minutes of staring, his mother had breathed heavily, "I know that you probably hate me, Azula, and-

His sister had then stood to her feet, whirling towards their mother, and her hands had been alighted with flames, filling Zuko with dread. "You left and abandoned us. You left us with our father, you know that, don't you? We had to suffer for years, both of us, under Ozai's monstrous hands. And you murdered our grandfather. Did you think that we wouldn't figure it out?" Azula's voice had never wavered, nor did it increase in volume. She was eerily calm; but Zuko had known that it was only the calm before the storm hit.

"I know that, and I hold myself-

"No, you don't!" Azula had interrupted again, finally raising her voice, golden eyes burning. "You know nothing! You left us with a monster. Zuko isn't the only one with visible and invisible scars, mother." Azula's calm had rapidly begun to fade and was replaced with poisonous rage.

"And do you think that I don't know that?" Their mother had snapped, glaring back at Azula, mirroring Zuko's sister in appearance. "Oh, I know, believe me, I truly do. Who do you think had kept your father at bay for all of those years before I left? My scars are deep and visible and invisible, too." It had been said in a whisper. Both brother and sister had stared at her in surprise. Azula, though, had recovered first.

"And do you think that that makes it any better? No, fuck you and your flawed reasoning, mother. At least I had the strength to stay and not run away." She had hissed through clenched teeth.

Zuko had watched his mother raise an eyebrow, "And your mind broke, as a result, my precious daughter." Tears had then begun to spill down their mother's cheeks. "I should have taken you with me – both of you. Even though we would have been caught, I should have done so. You're right, Azula, I was a coward. After I killed your grandfather, I was in a panic that I had never yet experienced, and the only thought on my mind during that time had been surviving."
Azula's flames had become hotter, glowing brighter. "And yet, you had found the time to say goodbye to Zuko!"

He had winced and rubbed his heart, as if physically wounded, which is what it had felt like. He had never known that Azula knew about that, and he didn't know that she had been envious.

"I'm not the only one to blame, my daughter!" Their mother's hands had become aflame for a moment, before she had then composed herself. "Did you ever give me a reason to think that you would miss me, or that you would want a good-bye? No, you didn't, because you were your great-grandfather's daughter. You had wanted nothing to do to me, and it had never been more apparent than during that last year." Tears had stained their mother's cheeks and Zuko had wanted to reach out and hug her but hadn't dared. He hadn't wanted Azula to think that he was choosing his mother's side.

"You thought that I was a monster!"

"I never said that, but yes, I did think it at times." Their mother had stepped closer, like she was approaching a Dragon. "What was I supposed to do, Azula? I didn't know how to deal with you! Zuko, he had been so easy to handle as a child; he was truly his father's son through and through, but you, my daughter? From everything that Iroh and Azulon had ever shared, you bore similitaries to Sozin himself! It also didn't help that you were too clever for your own good, sharing so many traits with me that I can scarcely recall them all."

"Get out!" Azula had screeched, the candles in the room exploding with sapphire flames. "You are nothing but a lazy whore, and an even worse mother!"

Zuko had closed his eyes in sorrow, but they had snapped open when he heard his mother stifle a deep wail of a sob, "Yes, I was, and I can see that now, but you should never doubt that I love you and your brother with my entire being." Before he had been able to react, their mother had lunged towards Azula, pulling her into her chest. Zuko had been scarcely able to move, to even draw breath into his airways, wondering if an unforeseen Airbender was reaping vengeance on him for Sozin's crimes, stealing the very air from his lungs.

"You fiend! Let me go!" Azula's shrieks of animalistic intensity had been eerily similar to the day of Sozin's Comet when she had been chained by Katara after the Agni Kai. "I swear on everything sacred in this world, even the Avatar himself, that I will kill you!" It had been then, during that moment, that he had noticed that Azula hadn't summoned any flames to wound their mother, or even kill her.

Their mother had, to Zuko's immense relief, let go of Azula, but she had then fallen to her knees before his sister, golden eyes flooded with tears. "Fine, do it, Azula."

Zuko had finally rushed forward, "No! What the fuck are you doing?" He had roared in outrage, his voice booming through the room in a horrifying echo.

"No, you don't have a say in this, my love," his mother hadn't even looked at him. "This is between Azula and I."

"Like hell it is!" He had snapped, staring fearfully at Azula's frozen form, sapphire flames dancing across her fingertips. "I demand that you stop this madness. I am the Fire Lord!"

His mother had still stared at Azula, "My beautiful boy, it didn't work when your father did it, and it's not going to work for you, all right? Trust me, okay? This is my wish. If Azula does kill me, no harm will come to her, promise me?"
"Never! There's no fucking way that I am going to-"

Their mother had finally glared at him and the resemblance to Azula in that moment had stolen his breath. "You will, and you will not regret it, I promise. Now you promise me, okay?"

The look of utter determination and resolve in her eyes had convinced him, deflating his anger, but not his fear. "Okay, fine, I promise that no harm will come to my sister if she... kills you." The words had been bitter to say aloud.

Their mother nodded and turned back to Azula, whom was still frozen, eyes hazy, and Zuko was afraid that she had snapped out of reality, that all of the work that she had made had deteriorated. "Azula, my precious daughter, I put my life in your hands, okay? You swore on the Avatar himself that you would kill me, so here's your opportunity, my love."

Azula had finally blinked and her eyes filled with an immoral glow, "You are truly foolish, mother, but nonetheless, I accept." Zuko had watched in terror as Azula's sapphire-alighted hands slowly reached towards their mother's face. He had wanted to turn away, away from the knowledge that he had sentenced his mother to death and that he had caused Azula's mind to break once again, but he couldn't. His eyes had been riveted towards the sight.

Just as Azula's flames had begun to lick their mother's face, she froze, flames growing weaker, eyes twitching as tears filled them. Her hands began to waver and slowly, their mother wrapped her fingers gently around the shaking hands. "It's okay, my love, I'm never leaving you again."

Azula had then abruptly jerked back as if she were the one burned, "Get out!" Azula had screamed, "Get out! NOW, I said! Out! LEAVE!" Before his sister had been able to change her mind about her decision, Zuko immediately grabbed his mother by the arm and had yanked her out of the room, slamming the door shut.

"No one is to go in that room until I command. If I find out that anyone does, it will be your heads cleaved from shoulders, understand?" Zuko had then ordered to the four imperial Firebenders that always stood guard by Azula's room. They had all nodded in unison and took up their standard positions.

Zuko had looked at his mother and noticed the tears that were beginning to fall down her cheeks once again, but he knew that these were from relief. He sighed, feeling his stress finally disperse; it had blown up in his face, but an essential truth had been found: Azula wasn't going to kill their mother. He had then quickly pulled her along the corridors until they reached his own chambers. Zuko had glanced at the metallic skulls of his own imperial firebending guards and they swiftly opened the large dragon-like door and, just as swiftly, shut it once the two royals had passed.

Zuko had then taken off his crown and gently placed it on the mantle above the fire. He ran his hand through his hair and sighed softly. "That could have gone better," he had winced immediately after the words left his lips. When he was just plain old Zuko, the real him, he was always so awkward. When Fire Lord, he was effortlessly able to order servants and generals around.

He had sometimes wished that he had made more of an effort to cultivate friends during his childhood. That would have probably helped him become more socially adept.

He looked at his mother. She was out on the balcony looking at nothing, but also everything. He walked over and stood next to her. Neither said a word. Until finally the silence was broken.

"Yes, it could have," Ursa admitted sadly. "Although it's a relief to know that Azula won't kill me, it breaks my heart to witness what Ozai turned her into."
Zuko had then looked at her. He hadn't been able to recall a time in his life when she had looked so devastated. Tears were still silently running down her face and Zuko pulled her into a hug. She clutched at him and Zuko reciprocated.

"I'm so sorry," his mother had whispered. "It's all my fault."

"No, it's not!" Zuko had pulled away and gripped her shoulders tightly. "Don't you ever say that, understand? It's his! It's his fault! It was never your fault! Do you understand? Ozai is to blame, not you, never you." Zuko finished his rant by breathing heavily, "It's not your fault."

"But it is," his mother had whispered again.

"NO, IT'S -"

"YES, IT IS!" She had screamed. "He tricked me!" She had turned away and her hands curled around the railing, her knuckles whitening by the second.

"What are you talking about?" Zuko asked in bemusement. "Who tricked you? Was it... Ozai?"

She had then not answered for several seconds, as if she was searching for the words. She sighed quietly, "Yes, it was your father. When Azula told me that Ozai was planning to kill you, I confronted him, and he admitted that he was going to do it. He then told me he would spare you if I killed Azulon and he became Fire Lord." She had paused and shuttered. "I snuck in through the secret passage and your grandfather had already been in his bed. I thought he was asleep," she had sighed heavily and glanced at Zuko.

He had been unsurprised, for he and Azula had talked about that night often, and through her help, he had realized the terrible truth about that night. Zuko went to put his hand on her shoulder but his mother turned away.

"The plan was to inject him with a special poison that would create a heart attack, but that's not what happened." She had then grimaced.

Ursa breathed in deeply; she was about to kill her own father-in-law, her children's grandfather, the Fire Lord himself, Sozin's son. She placed the needle on his neck and just as she was about to insert it, Azulon's hand wrapped around her own and she felt a hand bruise against her chest with crushing force. Ursa flew back a few feet, winded and looked up in fear. She heard Azulon's fingers snap and all the candles flared to life under the Fire Lord's power. Upon realizing that she was no longer in possession of the poison, her eyes frantically darted around until she found it: it was laying on the floor, out of her reach. She was surprised that it hadn't shattered.

"I had always expected such treachery from Ozai, you know, but never you. I would have never guessed that you, daughter, would try something." Azulon's face was contorted in anger but Ursa could see the hurt underneath. After all, she and Azulon were very close. They played pai sho together every day and he always ate with her and the children when he could spare the time.

"I'm doing what I have to, father! What else could I do? You gave me no other choice." Ursa's voice was calm and clear.

She was in quite the conundrum. She could try to fight him with firebending, but this was the Fire Lord himself, a man with ninety years of experience. Ursa knew that she was talented, a prodigy admitted to the Royal Academy, but she didn't stand a chance against the Fire Lord, against Sozin's son. A victory against him was unthinkable.

She had achieved feats that only those of the Royal Fire Bloodline have, and that's when she met
Azulon. He had taken an immediate interest in her and had swiftly introduced her to Ozai. She had fallen in love with him, and a few months later, they were married with Zuko on the way. They had only been sixteen years old.

Azulon glared at her, his own golden eyes burning. "So be it," he launched a wave of fire and leaped towards her. Ursa's eyes widened and she summoned her own flame to deflect the wave while rolling to the side to avoid her father-in-law. She immediately shot a jet of her fire towards the Fire Lord, but he smacked it aside and shot his own blast at her. Ursa rolled again but wasn't fast enough - part of her cloak was burning. She quickly put the flame out while Azulon stalked forward. She glanced to where the poison was, a few feet next to her. Azulon didn't notice. Her chances of actually grabbing the poison and reaching him in time to inject it were very slim. She was about to die, and she just had to know why.

"I would have never thought you would order Ozai to do such a thing! How could you? My son is innocent, and if I succeed, he will become a greater Fire Lord than you!" Ursa cried out, unable to keep the devastation from coloring her voice. She had thought that Azulon would continue his assault, but instead, he froze and a look of bemusement crossed over his face.

Ursa saw her chance and took it. Since she was still kneeling on the floor, she quickly rolled to the side again, grabbed the syringe, and simultaneously shot flames out of her feet to propel her forward. She flew towards Azulon, whose eyes had widened and his hands became alight with flames, but it was too late.

Ursa was too fast.

She maneuvered her body so that she was flying towards his shoulder. Azulon raised his arm to block her, but she grabbed it and wrenched it towards the ground. His body jerked down, and she jammed the needle into his neck and injected the poison in one smooth motion.

Azulon quickly turned around and his elbow slammed into her head. She fell to the floor and looked up to see the Fire Lord pull the needle out of his neck. Ursa brought her hand up to her head and felt blood streaming down the side of her head. She glanced at Azulon. He gazed at the empty tube, "Poison" he muttered. He looked at her and suddenly chuckled. "I've lived through numerous assassination attempts, yet the one that actually succeeds is the one committed by my own daughter." He shook his head. "I have learned to trust my instincts through my long life and they have never failed me in the past. I sense that there is more to this treachery than at first glance." Her father-in-law sighed, "I can sense that I only have precious time left, so I will ask you once again, daughter, why did you do this?" Azulon grabbed a chair and pulled it toward her and sat down.

"You gave me no choice, father! I did what I had to." Ursa's voice shook and she wiped at the tears that were beginning to fall down her cheeks. "What choice did I have?" She whispered.

"And what in Agni's name are you blabbering on about?" Azulon demanded. He leaned forward and stared at her intensely.

Ursa suddenly felt uncertain, "Princess Azula had eavesdropped after the presentation," she murmured, watching her father-in-law carefully. "She revealed that Ozai was going to kill Zuko, and when I confronted my husband about it, he told me that you had ordered him to kill his firstborn so that he would know the pain of losing his firstborn son just as Iroh-" She was interrupted as Azulon bolted to his feet.

"You were tricked, you foolish woman!" Azulon roared. He glared down at her, but when he saw the tears spilling down her cheeks, he softened ever so slightly. He pulled her up by the hands and
gestured for her to take a seat.

Ursa did and she had a terrible feeling, "What do you mean, father? I was tricked?" She questioned quietly, afraid of the answers.

Azulon stared at her for several seconds, face set in stone, "Do you believe me a fool, daughter?" He growled out. "Our family has just lost Lu Ten, second in line to the Dragon's Throne behind my heir, Prince Iroh. We need to show unity to our people, not prolicide and parricide! We do not act that way anymore; the Cousins' War ended centuries ago and it's in the past." He then shook his head in wonder or, perhaps, disbelief. "And do you honestly think that I would order Zuko's death, my own grandson, my own flesh and blood? Do you have such a low opinion of me, Princess Ursa?" Azulon clenched his jaw.

Ursa looked at him in surprise. "I didn't know what to believe, father, I didn't! I was scared and acted hastily." She was about to speak again but was interrupted.

"Yes, you seemed to jump to the conclusion that I would be willing to order my own grandson's death quite easily, Roku's granddaughter." Azulon's golden eyes burned like melted gold, "After today's debacle in the throne room, Ozai requested a private audience with me. He tried to fool me just as he fooled you, Princess Ursa, but I was unmoved unlike you. He tried to convince me to name him the Crown Prince, citing his reasoning that because Iroh no longer had an heir, his bloodline would die out, especially since he claimed that Iroh would not wish to remarry."

Ursa gasped, features paling in the light. "No, he wouldn't! Ozai would never..." Ursa trailed off, though, when she realized that what she had just said was a lie, the realization that Ozai would, indeed, attempt to seize the Dragon's Throne ahead of Iroh flushing through her. Her husband was no longer the man who she had married and fallen in love with. He would do anything to get the crown, she had known it for some time, but was too hopeful that she was wrong. He had changed into someone unrecognizable. A flimsy hope that the Face Stealer had stolen her husband's face, replacing it with someone else's, was easily snuffed out because she doubted that Koh had that power: to gift someone else control over another's body.

Azulon saw her realization and nodded "Yes, so, as you can easily imagine, I became incensed by his blatant betrayal of Iroh and told Ozai that he would know the pain of losing his firstborn, his heir." He paused and sighed, "I would never order my own grandson's death, Princess Ursa; I had thought that you would know that, but it seems that I was wrong. My intention was for Zuko and Azula to be given to Iroh for him to raise as his own."

Shock erupted through her mind as she sat there frozen in shock. After Azula had told her that Ozai was going to kill Zuko, she immediately went to Ozai and demanded to know if their daughter's accusations were true. Her husband had confirmed it, golden eyes looking at her expectantly, wanting to know what she would be willing to do to protect Zuko. Then, for the next hour, they had devised the plan to assassinate Fire Lord Azulon.

Realizing how much of a fool her husband had made her, Ursa fell to her knees before the Fire Lord, "My liege, my sorrow cannot express how terribly I have wronged you. I will admit, under my own power, that my intention was to assassinate you. I have always been your humble and loving servant, but you know as well as I do, that being a mother has been my first and foremost duty." Her eyes locked onto Azulon's, "I am very fond of you, my liege, always have been. You have treated me with such kindness, as if I was your own blood, but when it comes to my children's safety being compromised, I would do anything to make certain that the threat was neutralized or destroyed, no matter who the threat is. I can clearly see the folly now in trusting my husband's words, that he had preyed on my maternal instincts, knowing that I would fail to see clearly, and I hope that you find it in your heart to forgive me, my liege."
Azulon didn't say anything, glaring down at her for several moments before he continued, "Ozai was to lose his place in the line of succession and all titles as my second son were to be revoked, and his execution was to be considered." Her father-in-law suddenly seemed so tired; the poison was beginning to work. "The plan was for you and Iroh then to marry and sire more children. I would have forced him, provoking his loyalty to me, making him see that the Fire Royal Family was on the brink of disaster, and only a marriage would mend the wounds created by Ozai."

Ursa was numb, frozen in place. Her husband had manipulated her into killing his own father, and judging the paleness of Azulon's features, she would soon be his murderer, and all she felt was such sorrow and rage that it threatened to overwhelm her. "Father, I... am so sorry," she choked out, feeling the tears return.

"I can see now that you are not at fault. The blame lies at Ozai's feet." He gestured to his neck, "I am quite impressed that you pulled this off despite myself, daughter." Azulon chuckled quietly and then his features hardened, strength carved into his face in spite of the fact that his death was approaching. "My time is coming, my dear, and please know that I do not blame you for this, daughter. Besides Iroh and Ilah, you have always been my favorite person. Yet, in spite of that, you must be punished, daughter. You are soon to have murdered Agni's chosen ruler, anointed by the Fire Spirit himself, and committed patricide, something not seen in our nation since weeks after my father's own birth."

She closed her eyes and nodded her head in acceptance, "I will humbly abide by whatever you see fit, father, even if it is execution."

"Good, daughter, good. I assume that you and Ozai agreed that he would become Fire Lord after my death, bypassing Iroh, yes?" Ursa could do nothing except nod her head in shame. "If I've learned anything since when I witnessed your excellence in the Academy, it is that Ozai loves you fiercely, bordering on obsession ever since I introduced you two. So, I reason that you were to return to him after you killed me, correct, daughter?"

"Yes, father,"

Azulon closed his eyes, inhaling roughly, and then his eyes opened, a coldness shining within. "Then, as punishment to you both, you will immediately flee from the Caldera after I pass. It is your decision if you wish to take your children with you but know that if you do take Prince Zuko and Princess Azula with you, the entire world — and history, for that matter — will know of your crime. Ozai will slowly go mad without you by his side, and there is no better vengeance I can reap on my son then that. History will remember him as a monster, and it will be his own fault." Her father-in-law smiled and with a start, it reminded Ursa that she was in the presence of Sozin's son, of the man who had helped his father conquer half of the Earth Kingdom. "Although I grieve the loss of Lu Ten, daughter, I cannot help but see that fate has deemed it necessary, though. You should take pride, Princess Ursa. Your son will sit on the Dragon's Throne, and I foresee that my grandson will be hailed by the Four Nations over as a worthy ruler, and he will succeed where I, my father, and Iroh had failed in finding the Avatar."

She swallowed, fear beginning to plague her mind at the returned-Avatar's unholy vengeance. Would he destroy the Fire Nation and every Child of Fire in retribution over the Air Nomads' genocide? "Then my children will remain here; I wish them not to live like a fugitive."

"Then, as further punishment, daughter," Azulon's eyes were hard. "You will never be able to return to the Caldera unless your son, the future Fire Lord, seeks you out. You will stay at one of my homes in the Eastern Province, a place that Ozai would never expect. That is as far as my mercy runs, Princess Ursa, consider being grateful."

"I am, father, I truly am. If it takes my banishment to put my son on the Dragon's Throne, then I
would do it a thousand times over." She hesitated and gathered her courage, "They say that when the Gardens of the Dead are near, the death-touched ones can glimpse the future. You have foreseen Prince Zuko becoming Fire Lord and beloved by the Four Nations, which tells me that, somehow, the Air Nomads will return, but what of Princess Azula? What do you foresee concerning my daughter?"

Azulon tilted his head, "My, you truly have gall, daughter, but I am feeling generous to my murderer. Very well, I foresee Princess Azula walking a dangerous, deadly path. She will be molded by Ozai into a monstrous weapon, and fear will be a walking shadow behind her." Ursa quivered at the foretold future for her daughter, more tears spilling down her cheeks. "But, daughter, Princess Azula will eventually find peace in the most unlikely places, because of one person who could truly help her heal. She will have her own nation, Princess Ursa, and she will find glory, her very name echoing throughout history, side-by-side with that of her future husband's."

Ursa smiled tearfully, "Then, I'm glad, father. I don't want my precious daughter to… suffer in life."

"Oh, she will suffer, daughter, but it will make her all the stronger, and when she is an adult, she will be thankful for that suffering." Azulon reached over and squeezed her hand. He then looked into her eyes, and stood to his feet, slowly walking to his bed.

She rose as well and put her arm through his. "I am so sorry, father," she helped him sit down on the bed and he weakly went under the blankets.

"I forgive you, daughter. Your punishment isn't something that I wanted, but nonetheless, had to order. I can feel Ilah near, Princess Ursa, and I have missed her so." Azulon gradually became weaker and Ursa gripped his hand as he weakly squeezed back, and she kept a hold of his hand until it became limp.

**Fire Lord Azulon was dead.**

His mother had been crying after her tale ended, and Zuko found that his heart was filled with insurmountable hatred. He had felt relief that his grandfather had actually cared for him, and that the reason that his mother had never returned was her honor of a dying man's wish, but they had both been overwhelmed by the need to kill Ozai. He had found his hands gripping the steel railing until it melted under his firebending. He looked at his mother, at the sight of her standing stock still, heartbreak carved into her features. Zuko had quickly pulled her into his arms, "Grandfather was right, mom: it's not your fault. As he said, the blame lies solely on Ozai's shoulders." Zuko had whispered into her ear.

Nodding her head, his mother had sniffed, "I know that it is, but I still feel responsible. I murdered your grandfather, the Fire Lord himself, and it was me who failed to see through Ozai's blatant lies. Because of my mistake, he beat you and your sister. He burned your face and made our daughter go insane." She had been crying softly and Zuko knew that he could deal with his father later.

His mother had needed him during that moment.

She had soon claimed exhaustion and Zuko escorted her to her room. He had nodded to the guards and they opened the doors. Once inside, his mother had gently removed her arm from his own and sat on her bed, "When you visit him, do not let your emotions cloud your judgment, all right?" She had whispered tiredly, climbing into her bed.

Zuko had frowned, "What are you talking about? I'm not planning to visit anyone." He had
blatantly lied, not needing his mother to know of his intentions.

"Do not lie to me. I know that you will go visit your father as soon as I fall asleep."

Knowing that he was caught, he had clenched his jaw, "Of course I'm going to. He's ruined all of our lives!" Zuko had started pacing, feet digging into the floor.

"No matter what I say, I know you will visit him anyway." She had countered, frowning, "Just remember what I said, okay?"

"Yes, mother," he had muttered and exited the room, journeying towards his father's prison.

As soon as he had arrived, his father had laughed cruelly. "Well if it isn't my loyal son, the Fire Lord. Have you come here to ask again about your mother, boy?"

Zuko had promised his mother not to let his emotions cloud his judgment, but he was so close to exploding. "No, because I found her on my own," Zuko had smirked at his father's dumbfounded expression. "I didn't need your help; you have never helped me in my entire life." He had growled, feeling the flames begin to lick at his skin.

"That's not true, son." Ozai had pointed to his face, "I gave you my mark so that you would become stronger, so that you would learn respect." His father had stood up and crossed his cage and stood right before Zuko; they were eye-to-eye, identical colored-eyes locking. "I can see now that I had only succeeded with the former." He had smirked, teeth gleaming like a predator's in the dim light, but Zuko had caught a hint of pride in his father's voice and it had only made him more furious.

With a yell of rage, he had shifted into a firebending stance. Relishing in the look of fear that had found its way into Ozai's eyes, Zuko had let the fire flow. The steel cage had quickly melted and Zuko stepped inside with fire rushing through his blood. Ozai looked around at the remnants of his once prison and actually smiled genuinely. "You have grown very powerful, son," that time the pride in his voice had been unmistakable.

Zuko had stalked closer and kicked Ozai in the chest, sending him painfully into the wall with a surprised grunt of pain. He surged forward, and his hand had wrapped around Ozai's throat, squeezing very tightly, hands beginning to grow hot. "I so very badly want to kill you. But I won't. I could easily mark you as you did me, but I'm not going to, because I'm better than you." Zuko had reluctantly let go of his father's throat and Ozai sank to the floor, heaving in as much air as he could, golden eyes disgusted.

His father had stared into his eyes, eyes that Zuko had noticed were never more identical to his own than during that moment. "You should just kill me, Fire Lord." He had brought his hand up to his throat, lightly massaging it. "You clearly want to, I can tell," he had smirked up at him again, daring him.

Zuko's hands had curled into fists, and when Ozai noticed the action, his poisonous eyes had lit up in delight. Although the thought had crossed his mind, enticingly showing him a world where his father was dead, he had had other plans. Instead, he had twisted his body and swung his leg around until it connected to his father's temple. Ozai head had snapped to the side painfully and blood flowed down from his head in a small stream, but surprisingly, he had still been conscious. Glaring up at him defiantly, Ozai had snarled like a wild animal, and Zuko quickly hammered his fists into his temple until he had finally fallen unconscious.

After walking out of the cell, he had ordered the group of guards to take the prisoner to another cell, knowing that it would be asinine to leave his father in a room without a cell. Even without
bending, his father was still incredibly dangerous. Finally heaving punches into his father had been cathartic, and as he had walked back to his room using the secret passage, peace and disgust had warred in his mind until peace won, spreading through his mind in a comforting blanket. That day, he had known that he possessed the willpower to never succumb to the dark and vile urges that existed inside him, to know that he was never going to become like his father.

Zuko blinked as he came out of his reminiscing, hearing the footsteps approaching from behind him. Without turning around, his mother's soothing voice drifted into his ears. "Your meeting will begin shortly, Zuko."

"I know, mother," Zuko smiled at her as she sat down next to him, chuckling as the Turtle Ducks greeted her, squawking happily.

She picked up some of the leftover bread and fed the ducks. "I'm worried about you," she said softly after a few moments of silence. "You work far too hard and your only companions are me, Azula, who is imprisoned, and your uncle. It's been years since I returned and Azula's healing, yet you've made no friends or any effort to contract an advantageous marriage for yourself."

"Mom, we've had this conversation before," he pointed out. "I'm fine, you should know that."

Zuko knew what was coming next.

"You're lonely and I wish that you would give a nice girl a chance to love you, my beautiful boy." His mother stared at him.

Zuko sighed. There it was. "Mom, I don't need a girlfriend or a wife. I'm fine," he said tiredly.

"The Fire Nation and the Noble Houses would beg to differ, my son. They have been pushing their daughters and sisters at you like they are common whores. They seem quite lovely, and they might make you happy, and they would be willing to bear you your children, the heirs to the Dragon Throne."

"I'm fine," he repeated, wishing that she would drop the subject.

"But you're not! You are so lonely. I know all about the concubines, but that's not healthy. Currently, your best friend is your own mother." She gazed at the Turtle Ducks, "I know that you had to banish Mai and Ty Lee," she began softly.

"That was one of the reparations that I was forced to concede to the Earth Kingdom after the Great War ended." Zuko snapped as he closed his eyes. "I tried and tried, but Kuei, Ba Sing Se's King, was adamant that the conquerors of Ba Sing Se were to be given to him and put on trial, which would end with them being executed! When Mai and Ty Lee learned of Kuei's demands, they had willingly agreed to turn themselves in, trying to focus Kuei's ire at them instead of Azula, unwilling to see Azula handed over. Then, I broke them out of prison using my Blue Spirit persona, giving them the only choice that I could which included their survival. They understood, and I had to banish them for their escape from prison, and thus, their so-called 'treachery'. I have no idea what happened to them; I lost contact years ago, and Kuei, that little entitled prick, was not pleased when I told him that they had escaped custody." Zuko could feel his anger mounting and snarled, flames sparking across his palms. "That's the only reason that I haven't released Azula from prison! Even though her mind has finally healed, and you two are civil with one another, I can't do it! If I did, there would be another fucking war!" Zuko sagged and leaned against the tree.

"I know, my darling," his mom gently placed a hand on his arm. "But isn't there someone else who could fill that void in your life? Specifically, a girl?"
Zuko thought of beautiful blue eyes the color of the ocean themselves, a smile that was brighter than the sun and could melt any iceberg, and the peace that had settled in his soul whenever he had been in her presence.

Katara.

He looked at his mother, "No, there isn't, mother," he admitted, refusing to confess that the fact made him terribly sad.

His mother looked at him regretfully, "Well, maybe you will meet a nice girl someday. You mentioned your friends during the Great War," she suggested.

"I doubt it, mother," Zuko stood up and smiled gently, "I think that I've delayed my meeting long enough."

"Yes, of course," she gestured, "Go to your meeting, Zuko. Just remember what I said, okay?"

Zuko nodded and exited the Royal Garden. He made his way into the corridor and glanced around, making certain that they were no prying eyes. And when he was satisfied that he was alone, he put his flaming hand on a section of the wall and one of the many secret passages made its presence known. He stepped through and his footsteps echoed lightly as he journeyed, his mind easily finding the passage that led to the Throne Room. The passage then, after more minutes of walking, deposited him behind his Dragon Throne. It was now time for him to dawn the mantle of Fire Lord once again. The wall of flames roared to life and all the men bowed reverently before him.

He wearily settled on his throne, the conversation with his mother weighing heavily on his mind, and he was truly thankful that only his imposing silhouette could be seen by everyone in the room.

"All hail Fire Lord Zuko! Master of Agni's Eternal Flame! Keeper of the Dragon's Throne!" All the kneeling men cried out in unison. Zuko sighed, knowing that this meeting was going to be a long one.

XxXxXxXxXxX

That's all for chapter one! I'd really appreciate some reviews, everybody!

**Okay, eight years have passed since Sozin's Comet and Zuko's ascension to Fire Lord. Many things have happened since then.

**So, I changed Ursa into a Firebender because, to me, it does not make sense for a non-bender to marry into the Fire Nation's Royal Family. Being a bender is crucial in the Fire Nation; nobody would accept a princess who couldn't bend. And I honestly think that Zuko bears far more similarities to his father than to his mother, and Azula is the opposite. Based on how Ozai was characterized in Canon, I see Zuko's personality as pretty much the same thing if he had continued down his path before seeing 'the light', whereas Azula's is from her mother, and possible grandparents.

**Azulon wasn't necessarily a bad guy; he had inherited the Great War from his father and continued Sozin's conquest. It never made sense, in Canon, when Azulon pretty much tasked Ozai to murder Zuko. Lu Ten, second in line to the Dragon's Throne, had just been killed. Why would Azulon, a man who has been sovereign for over twenty years, task Ozai to kill another heir to the Dragon's Throne? It didn't make sense, so I changed things up.
Also, the reason that Ursa doesn't return to her son after the Great War is that of Azulon. Although he isn't necessarily a bad guy, he isn't a nice guy, either. He gets his revenge on both Ursa and Ozai for their alliance to murder him. He has always liked Ursa, so he sanctions an 'out' for her situation so that she can return to the Caldera, but only if it is Zuko, when he is Fire Lord, who finds her, and no one else. I hope that it seems like a viable reason and action on Azulon's part because I truly like it.

So, leave a review and tell me what you all think! I'd really appreciate it!

Stay Safe
ButtonPusher
Aang had found that it was so much easier to deal with the genocide of the Air Nomads when he had been younger and surrounded by friends, but things were different now. He was alone, more apparent of how alone he truly was as the Avatar and the last of the Air Nomads than ever before. When he had first come back to the temple after the Great War, after he had managed to triumph over Ozai during Sozin's Comet, he was finally able to truly mourn, mourn for his old life, his race, his culture, Gyatso, Kuzon, all the lives that had been lost while he was stuck in an iceberg, ignorant of how his disappearance was affecting the world that he was supposed to protect, and the life that he should have lived had things turned out differently, how he had wanted to live his life.

His first act upon his return to the Southern Air Temple several years after the Great War was to finally give his fellow Air Nomad their proper burials and then return the Temple to its former glory.

Aang had delicately gathered all the remains of his kin that he had been able to find throughout the Temple, gently handling the countless skeletons of his old friends and even the newly-born children and had set them on the pyre at the very top of the Temple. The sky was dark, the air itself stale as it seemed to realize how traumatic this event was for him.

With a simple flick of his wrist, the pyre became alight with flames and this time, Aang was there to watch his people burn. The fire crackled through the air and visions molested his mind like an inexperienced lover, his eyes seeing images of his kin being冷冷ly murdered by Fire Lord Sozin's armies on the day of Sozin's Comet over a hundred years ago. Fire was ever-present as the screams of his people echoed in his soul, traumatizing him more than anything ever had, even when he had first seen Gyatso's corpse.

Even though thick, harsh, and bitter tears were blurring his vision, he began to perform the ritual flawlessly, refusing to allow his grief to ruin his people's final rights. Swinging each arm forward, the ashes of his people slowly rose in the air, dancing in the murky-colored sky. He turned, and with his arms going level with his shoulders, started to rotate his hands. The air then began to whip around, lashing out gently as it gathered power, blurring together faster and faster until it became a tornado.

Aang watched as the ashes became one with the wind itself and knew that the ceremony was about to end. As he pulled his arms into his chest and the air slowed down slightly, Aang curled his hands into fists and with a roar of emotional effort, slammed his hands on the ground. The air rushed below him and swirled underneath his body for just a second, and then it exploded.
outward, dispersing into the open sky.

He stared upwards, tears spilling down his cheeks as he observed the spirits of his fallen people finally become at rest. They were ethereal in the heavens, but Aang couldn't join them, he would never be able to join them no matter how much he wanted to. While they were finding peace deep in the bowels of the sky, he was forever tethered to the Earth. He briefly saw Gyatso's incandescent spirit look down at him from his final resting place in the sky, and Aang choked on a deep wail of emotional upheaval. His Master only nodded his head and closed his eyes, every spirit of the slaughtered Air Nomads from the Southern Air Temple vanishing in a sweeping gust of wind, claiming their rightful places in the Gardens of the Dead.

The only evidence left of the event was the charred pyre, and Aang stared brokenly at the small gusts of wind that would occasionally brush against him in comfort. "Goodbye," he whispered.

Aang looked at the still smoking pyre and punched his fist at it. The air around him surged forward, blasting the pyre apart with devastating power, and with a wave of his hand, the pieces of the pyre were swept off the mountain by a brief gust of wind.

He stood silently for several seconds and that's when he finally broke down, every boundary that he had ever erected to keep himself from succumbing from the unimaginable grief shattering like ice. He bitterly and harshly wept for he was all alone, a living relic, and the last of his kind. The more he sobbed, the more his heart fractured, and that's when he realized that nobody could ever understand how... alone he was in this life. He wasn't just the last Airbender, he was the Avatar, a being cursed to live for centuries and one whose sole purpose was to serve the world, a life to live only selflessly. But he didn't want to be selfless, he was weary of it, sick of it. For once, he wanted to be selfish, to drown under the sorrow brimming in his soul.

His heart finally broke, and with it, his control. The mountain began to rumble as his tears spilled more violently, a terrible anguish erupting in his heart. Cracks in the stone appeared around him, spider-webbing erratically, and something clawed through the obscurity in his soul, trying to reach him. "Everything will be okay, Aang," Avatar Yangchen's voice echoed in the darkness. "You are not alone, no matter how lonely you feel. We are here, all of us."

Aang opened his eyes and the mountain stopped shaking violently, returning to its dormant state. He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes as moved his body into a lotus position. He closed his eyes and concentrated for several seconds. A grayish cloud floated out of his body and floated forward until it was across from him. It swirled around and grew bigger until finally, it formed into the shadow of a person. Aang opened his eyes and stared at Avatar Yangchen.

She didn't ask questions; she understood. Perhaps, it was because they were both borne to the Air Nomads or maybe, it was because they were technically the same person, but Aang didn't care. He just needed someone who understood.

"I feel your pain, young Airbender." Yangchen's eyes were so full of sorrow that Aang knew that she did truly understand what he was feeling.

"I don't know what to do," he admitted quietly, feeling the grief in his heart, beginning to be stroked by his emotions. "It's just me and I'm alone. I'm the Avatar and the last Airbender in the entire world. Believe me, I've looked, and Fire Lord Sozin and his blood-soaked armies left no stones unturned in their pursuit to kill every Airbender, eradicating entire bloodlines." Aang felt the tears reappear and did nothing to stop them.

"The Air Nomads will rise again." Yangchen smiled sadly, her own eyes shining with ethereal tears. "It will take time, but the Airbenders will return to the world. It has been foretold, and you will be the father of an entire nation."
"I know that they will. The Sages of every nation have pressuring me to marry, or at the very least, spread my seed in every woman who I can find, bringing life to my dead race. But I'm not ready for something like that, Avatar Yangchen, if I ever will be. I'm only fifteen years old, and yet, I'm so lonely, more alone than anyone." He paused and looked out into the open sky. "No one understands, not even you, Avatar Yangchen. It isn't your burden to bear, but it is mine and mine alone, and with each passing day, it becomes heavier and heavier, like the weight of the heavens itself crushing down my shoulders just as it does my heart." He whispered.

"That is true, Avatar Aang, and I cannot imagine the fathomless depths of your many burdens, but perhaps our presence can at least ease those burdens." Yangchen's eyes closed for a moment, and more grayish mist formed. A few seconds later, Aang saw Airbenders appear behind his Air Nomad Avatar predecessor, and he immediately knew who they were: all of the Air Nomad Avatars. "You are never alone, Aang. We all understand, better than anyone, what you are feeling. The grief of losing the Air Nomads afflicts our hearts just as it does your own, and we all know the hardships of being the Avatar. We are here, Aang, and we will never leave you." Yangchen gestured to all the beings behind her and they all transformed into mist, rushing into her body as she rose to her feet and her body became solid, touchable.

Aang's eyes widened and he unconsciously stood up, as well, mirroring his past life. He hesitantly walked towards Yangchen and she stepped forward as well. As he stopped right before her, uncertain of what to do, she smiled gently, almost motherly, and pulled him in for a fierce hug. It was then, during that moment, as her arms were wrapped around him, that he felt surrounded by his people; he could feel the Air Nomads again, feel their soothing and life-cherishing energy wrapping around him in a blanket of freedom. Aang clutched Yangchen tightly and, together, they sank down to their knees, both weeping and mourning for their lost race and people.

After cleaning up the Southern Air Temple, Aang had then soon traveled to the other three Air Temples and done the same. The Earth Kingdom refugees who stayed in the Northern Temple tried to help with the ceremony, but Aang had stubbornly, Earthbender-like denied them. It was something that he had had to do for himself.

When he had begun reconstructing the Northern Temple, he had enlisted the Mechanic's help in designing the new layout for the Temple. That had been the first time, nor had it been the last, when he had realized that not all of the Air Nomad society customs would be seen again; some would die with him. Then, after making the modifications and reconstructing the damaged structure, Aang had finally begun to teach the Earth Kingdom refugees the Air Nomad way of life. It was his one condition if they were going to stay at the Temple, it was something that he refused to budge on. They must adopt the Air Nomad way and lifestyle as their own, and they must teach the future generations, too. They would now be Air Nomads in everything except bending.

After several weeks, he had deemed them adequate enough not to need his constant supervision. He had been so impressed and thankful for Teo's efforts to immerse himself in Aang's culture, that he had even attempted to heal Teo's paralyzed legs. After multiple sessions, he had been able to return full feeling to the limbs, but that was it. He didn't have the necessary skill to completely heal them, and he hadn't wanted to draw upon the Avatar State, wary of showcasing such terrible power to the new Air Nomads, but Teo hadn't cared. He had been ecstatic and thanked Aang profusely. When he had left the Northern Air Temple, he had promised that once he became more skilled in healing, he would fully heal Teo's legs.

When he had arrived at the Western Temple, it was unsurprisingly and thankfully deserted. He had wanted to be alone as he gave the fallen Air Nomads their proper final rights, not wanting...
another scene where he had had dozens of eyes cataloging his every move.

Once he had finished, shedding even more tears, Aang had begun to rebuild the Temple, and he had seen the signs from when he and the Gaang had camped at the Temple for several weeks, and the brief battles that had taken place, the memory of the Fire Nation War Ship crashing through the ancient walls ever-present. The restoration had been difficult because Western Temple had been the most damaged out of all of the Temples – it was closest to the Fire Nation – but, after a month, he had completed the task.

Upon arriving at the Eastern Temple, Guru Pathik had been waiting for him. Aang bowed to him and his spiritual mentor had done the same.

"I had a feeling that you would return here." Pathik had smiled with a twinkle in his eyes and it was so reminiscent of Gyatso that Aang had felt tears well up in his eyes.

"It's so good to see you again." Aang had stepped forward and pulled the Guru into a hug. Pathik's laughter made its way to his ear, and when he had pulled back from the hug, he could have sworn that he had seen Gyatso standing behind Pathik for just a moment.

"Come, Aang – and Appa and Momo, too. Let's get you all some onion and banana juice."

Aang had laughed, peace setting in his heart as he had been in the presence of one who grieved for the Air Nomads just as he had. "You know, that sounds really good, Pathik."

Since Pathik had not been an Airbender, he had never been able to give the fallen Air Nomads their proper rights. Aang had quickly set up the ceremony while Pathik stood off to the side, gazing morosely at the pyre.

Once finished with the ritual, Aang had set to work on renovating the temple, and with the Guru's help, he had been able to finish in only a few days. Before he had left, though, Pathik had given him a foreboding-filled warning.

"Peace has not yet been fully restored, Aang. There are dark forces who are plotting to throw the world back into chaos. It may be decades, maybe centuries, or even tomorrow, but another Great War will be waged across this world."

Aang had been confused, and more than a little afraid. "And who are these dark forces?" He had questioned incredulously.

"Names have power, Aang - I cannot tell you. It is something that you must discover on your own, my friend." Pathik's words had been stated adamantly.

Aang had then left the Eastern Air Temple feeling defeated and weary.

When he had finally returned to the Southern Temple again, he hadn't known what to do. The world was well on its way to recovering, and it falsely seemed that the Avatar wasn't needed, especially since he had personally invested his time in visiting the three remaining nations to make sure that no disorder would arise.

He had stayed for over a year in the Fire Nation after Zuko's ascension to help solidify his friend's rule. Then, he had traveled throughout the Earth Kingdom to settle disputes. After over half of a year there, he had journeyed to the Water Tribes to help them rebuild.

When staying in the Southern Water Tribe, Aang had realized that he didn't truly love Katara. He was only in love with the idea of her. He needed someone who could accept him for who he truly was: the world's babysitter. And Katara wasn't that person. She feared him. Not Aang, but the
Avatar. She had always looked at him differently after the Avatar State had made an appearance like she was looking to see if the monster was truly gone. He honestly couldn't blame her, for he doubted any woman in the world wouldn't be horrified by the Avatar State.

And Aang belonged to the world first. Any relationships or family would be put second, or even third. Katara could not and would never accept that, leading to countless fights that always entailed the same arguments. She also wouldn't want the pressure of being the mother to an entire nation. So, he had ended things with her. She hadn't seemed too disappointed, actually the opposite, if he wasn't mistaken.

Every person who he had met during his travels had always, unbearably found a way to ask him the same question. *Have you discovered any hidden Airbenders?* And his response had always been the same, becoming answered in a darker tone after each question: no.

He had begun teaching the refugees in the Northern Temple the beliefs and customs of his people, but it wasn't enough, nothing was enough, no matter how hard he had tried.

He was still the Last Airbender.

The Sages of every nation had kept pestering him to bed as many women as possible to bring life to his dead race, but every time, he had always found the idea detestable. Yet, he was the Avatar, and it was his duty to preserve balance and there couldn't be balance with only three nations. The Avatar Cycle would eventually be broken, and it would be all his fault if that happened because he had been too selfish. Aang knew that if he had to, he would concede to the Sages, but he knew that he would probably never forgive himself. That wasn't what he wanted, it wasn't who he wanted to be.

Aang truly yearned for someone who wouldn't fear him, and who would willingly accept every part of him, challenge him, and would always be honest with him. He needed somebody who would be willing to help bring back the Airbenders, and a woman who wouldn't be disappointed if their future children weren't a bender from their homeland. But he didn't want a woman too willing, someone who just wanted him for the power and fame and glory it would surely, inevitably bring her. The future Mother of the Air Nomads' name would echo throughout history, songs and poems declared in her honor as she alone would bear an entire nation.

Coming out of his recollection of the previous eight years, Aang stared out over the mountain, sighing. He closed his eyes, trying to draw upon the peace that had eluded him for years. If he was being truthful with himself, he had lost hope of ever finding that someone. He'd traveled the world several times over, and no one had ever caught his interest. He had even begun to think that he would have no choice but to succumb to the Sages' wishes.

It also didn't help that he was slowly descending into madness, the frequently-seen spirits of the fallen airbending children at the Temple assaulting his eyes, making him feel his loss so much more. Was that going to be his legacy? After all of his immense work, would he then be known as the Mad Balance-Keeper? What would history declare about him? How would his reign as Avatar be hailed amongst his predecessors and future successors?

Shaking his head, he solemnly made his way to the top of the Temple and summoned Roku forward from the depths of his mind and soul.

"Hello, Aang," Roku's voice was the same as it always was and Aang took peace from the steady sound.

"Hello, Roku. I'm so confused and I don't know..." he trailed off quietly, not truly knowing what he wanted to say to his past life.
Roku simply nodded, "You are feeling your burden as the Avatar more than ever before, aren't you?" He asked solemnly.

"And I don't know what to do!" He exploded, all of the negative emotions that had been festering for years swelling inside. "I ended the war but why does it feel like I still have so much more to do?" Aang questioned brokenly.

"That is the curse of being the Avatar." Roku declared, his powerful voice echoing across the mountain. "Many people are jealous and wish our power for their own, but they are ignorant, Aang, so terribly ignorant. Every time when we have been reincarnated, we have never wanted to be the Avatar, my friend. We always wanted to give the title and power to someone else, but we couldn't." Roku frowned, golden eyes narrowing. "Well, except Kuruk, but he later realized the curse that we have always been burdened with."

Aang nodded tiredly, knowing that it was the truth, "Kuruk had been arrogant during his life, even after Ummi's abduction by Koh." He murmured, watching his past life.

"Yes, but after Koh's actions that day, he became unrecognizable to everyone who had ever somewhat known him; the grief had warped his personality, turning an arrogant, but good man cruel. You have always been a gentle soul, Aang. Do not become corrupted by grief as Avatar Kuruk did." Roku looked him in the eye, "It is an all-too familiar sight: someone who becomes distorted in their heart to who they once were." Roku gazed at him morosely, "You have suffered your whole life, Aang, and that is my fault. I failed utterly in my duty, in ways that are unbecoming of an Avatar. Nothing from the past century would have happened if I had done my job."

"I've forgiven you for that, Roku,"

Roku only closed his eyes, ignoring Aang's words, and he saw memories of his life flash before his eyes and, throughout it all, he could hear Roku's voice. "You had always felt different from the other Air Nomads and you never realized why that was until you were told of your identity as the Avatar far too soon. And when you awoke from a century of sleep, it was to find a world that had been ravaged by war. Everything was different, and you learned of the massacre of the Air Nomads with no one there to share your grief because of my foolish mistakes. You were then given an impossible task: to master the elements in less than a year and defeat the Fire Nation." Aang then saw himself merge with the Spirit of the Ocean and the subsequent annihilation of the Fire Navy. "You've seen death..." he saw himself destroying General Fong's base in his rage, "and people have died by your hands."

He came out of his trance in a rush, "No, they didn't! That wasn't me, it was the Avatar Spirit!" Aang protested vehemently, "How could you say that?" He finished, glaring at Roku.

"You are the spirit of the world in mortal form, Aang," Roku opened his eyes and lifted his head. "Just as I was and just as every Avatar has ever been, Air Nomad or not"

"But I would never kill those people!" Aang cried out in disbelief.

"You would never kill those people on purpose." Roku pointed out and he sighed deeply, "You are capable of unimaginable rage, Aang. Whenever the Avatar State is triggered when you are in emotional distress, your anger is joined with all your predecessors and all of the negative mortal emotions that they had felt during their reign as Avatar. And when that happens, people inevitably get caught in the crossfire. When gods fight or get angry, my friend, mortals are the ones who die, not the gods."

Aang shook his head, trying to stop the flashes, the mists! Sightless eyes stared back at him and he
tried to look away, but he couldn't. "No, I wouldn't…" he trailed off, a deep part of him recognizing that Roku was right, but he couldn't accept it, he couldn't!

"I killed people during my reign as Avatar." Roku smiled grimly, whispers of sadness at the edges, "I should have killed Sozin, I know that now. Even though he was my best friend, I should have killed him for the good of the world, but I refused to do so. Instead, I allowed my sentiment to cloud my judgment, Aang, and you know what inevitably happened because of my weakness."

He spluttered in outrage, "But he was your best friend! How could you say that? I saw your memories and saw the goodness that had been in Sozin."

"That goodness that had once existed in my friend had long been exterminated when he began the Great War, Aang." Roku's voice was hard, on the brink of reprimanding. "Look at what he did to your people, and all of the other nations."

His eyes narrowed into slits, the air around them beginning to howl with displeasure. "Don't you dare bring my people into this!"

"It displeases me to provoke your familial ties to the Air Nomads, Aang, it truly does, but it is the only way for you to see the truth. Sozin was my best friend, yes, but he turned into a monster, a monster whom would terrorize the world for decades."

Aang released the air in his lungs and pivoted to Roku's point earlier, "Well, how could you kill those people you mentioned? And what about—"

Roku interrupted, "I do not regret killing those people. I wish I did, but I don't and, frankly, they deserved it." He suddenly seemed weary, "It is our duty to preserve peace no matter what, Aang. That is the sole purpose for which the Avatar exists. I know you were born to the Air Nomads, but you have to remember that you are not just an Airbender. You are a Waterbender, Earthbender, and a Firebender. You are all the elements, just as you are all the nations." Roku looked at him expectantly.

He was frozen in place. He had the feeling that he had spoken this conversation before. Perhaps, in one of his past lives, but he still couldn't accept it. "I didn't kill Ozai. I took his bending instead." Aang said triumphantly.

Roku nodded, "Yes, I know, but sometimes the only solution is the vilest. There are beings more powerful than a Fire Lord under Sozin's Comet, Aang." Roku warned and then gazed out into the open sky. "In every lifetime we have killed because there is always a threat. And it is always the Avatar's duty to dispose of that threat. Do you think that the Air Nomad Avatars haven't killed? If so, you are wrong, my friend."

Aang knew that his predecessor was right; he was not just an Airbender, he was the Avatar, but he continued to latch onto the beliefs of his dead people because that's all he had left of them. "But there has to be another way!" He cried out desperately, remembering Yangchen's words the day before he had faced Ozai, remembering how she had revealed that it was foolish not to kill Ozai.

Roku smiled reassuringly, "You don't have to kill everyone, Aang. Most Avatars have only killed when the situation was dire, and no other choice presented itself, me included." Roku began to fade away, "Do not let yourself change into someone unrecognizable. Remember who you are and think about the advice I've given you." He suddenly dispersed into mist and flew back into his body.

Aang fell onto his back and stared at the sky as if it had all the answers. Pathik's warning was fresh in his mind after years, and so was Roku's warning minutes previously about beings of far
greater power than Ozai under Sozin's Comet. He felt so tired. He closed his eyes and he heard Roku one last time, "You are never alone, Aang." His voice was soothing, and it allowed Aang to finally relax and sleep.

Aang found himself in the library, one of the largest parts of the Temple. He had initially been surprised it had survived the attack over a century ago, but he was more than grateful, nonetheless - the scrolls should have eroded long ago, but somehow, they were still in pristine condition.

When he had run away at twelve-years-old after discovering that he and Gyatso were going to be separated, when he had first left the Temple with no guardian, he hadn't known everything that he should have of the Air Nomad culture, and as a result, since he was now the last of the Air Nomads, he didn't truly know everything he should about the culture that he was trying to revitalize. So, he had finally decided that only the library could truly help him in rectifying his problem.

The library was massive, and he was wary that Wan Shi Tong, He-Who-Knows-Ten-Thousand-Things, would try to steal all of the knowledge that had been amassed in the Temple for thousands of years, since the dawn of the Air Nomads. Countless scrolls and frescoed walls stared back at him, the ancient pillars of inscribed marble shining under Agni's rays. Inhaling from the realization that he would have to sort through the thousands upon thousands of scrolls in the library of not just the Southern Temple, but all of the Air Temples, he decided to worry about it later.

After walking to the center of the library, Aang squatted down, and with the aid of his airbending, jumped towards the thousand-foot ceiling. Blurring past dozens upon dozens of rows and shelves and columns, he placed an air-ball underneath him and sat down, floating just underneath the ceiling, his bald head almost touching. For several moments, he simply floated there, gazing at all of the scrolls that he could see, and one caught his eye. It looked incandescent, divine, as if the Air Spirit herself had created it. The symbol of air engraved in the seal seemed alive when he looked at it, and with a wave of his arm, the air carried the scroll to his awaiting hands.

Aang scattered the air-ball into nonexistence and easily floated back down to the ground from the thousand-foot height. He unfurled the scroll and sat down, gray eyes eagerly devouring the text. The rays of Agni streamed through the window and he was easily able to read the characters.

His jaw slightly dropped as his eyes bulged from their sockets, disbelief carved into his features. The scroll was one of an ancient airbending form. It detailed how an Airbender could achieve true flight without the use of a glider or a bubble of air as Aang had used in the Avatar State multiple times, specifically against Ozai during Sozin's Comet.

After rereading it multiple times, making certain that his eyes weren't deceiving him, Aang looked up in awe. How could he have never heard of such an ability for an Airbender? He had always thought it strange how airbending didn't advance beyond what he already knew, but now, he knew better.

It made sense, though, the true flight for an Airbender, because each of the bending arts had an advanced power that only few could ever achieve: Waterbenders could bend the very blood in someone's body during the full moon, Earthbenders had the potential to bend metal, and Firebenders could generate lightning and, apparently, combustion-bending since Combustion Man had been hired by Zuko.

And now, Aang had finally unearthed the advanced power for the Airbenders.

Aang looked back down at the scroll, eyes roaming over the two sentences. 'Let go of the
misconceptions that plague you. Enter the void and become the wind.'

He looked up in bemusement, flabbergasted by how little the scroll detailed about the actual ability. He didn't have any misconceptions that he was aware of, so why did he still need a glider or the Avatar State to fly?

The Avatar State! Directly before Azula had shot him with lightning in Ba Sing Se, he had been weightless, glaring down at the Dai Li agents and Zuko, floating as if he were the Air Spirit herself. Aang looked at his tattooed hands, realizing that one or more of his predecessors had unlocked this ability, the ability of true flight for Airbenders.

But he had no idea who it could be, though. There have been countless Avatars, since the beginning of time. He was the World Spirit incarnate, so any of them could have unlocked true flight, but Aang had a feeling that only a few ever actually did.

He knew that he would have to ask his past lives, but he had no idea where to start. Roku had probably never heard of the power. He didn't like Kyoshi, so that meant that she wouldn't be summoned forward. He would bet all of the gold in Zuko's coffers that Kuruk wouldn't know, but Yangchen might actually have leads. He moved into the Lotus Position and called her forward.

"Hello, Aang,"

"Avatar Yangchen," he nodded his head in greeting. "What do you know about true flight?"

"Only legends, my friend, only legends, tales that old Airbenders wove when they could no longer hold a glider."

Aang frowned and held up the scroll for her to see, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. "Then what is this?"

Yangchen's eyes widened in surprise, her ethereal features a mass of shock. It was the first emotion that Aang had ever seen from her besides sorrow and pain. "Where did you get this?" She breathed out, disbelief echoing in her words.

Aang pointed up to the shelf from where he took the scroll. "It was on the top one. My head was grazing the ceiling, you know."

Yangchen then scrutinized the shelf. "I had never believed those tales," she finally said after several moments of silence. "But now it seems that the legends are true." She looked back at him, eyes narrowed. "It is strange, though, isn't it, Avatar Aang? Why the Elders of the Southern Air Temple would have that scroll in the library where anyone can find it?"

"The libraries in all of the Air Temples are designed so that the more complicated and advanced forms are on the higher shelves. The more that an Airbender practices and trains, the higher they will be able to jump. So, only a true Master of Air could have ever hoped to reach that high."

She waved his words away impatiently, looking like she had refrained from actually rolling her eyes. "Yes, yes, I know, but I have never seen an Airbender who achieved true flight. If there was always a scroll detailing that ability in this Temple's library, then why have you, or I, never heard of a Master of Air who used that power?" Yangchen questioned seriously.

Aang blinked as he realized that he didn't actually have a factual answer; he finally began to understand what Avatar Yangchen was implying.

"The Elders would have never put it there," he commented at last.
"Yes, so I see that you have come to the same realization as I have. This is something that you must contemplate over. If you want my advice: you should go deeper into the Avatar Cycle to find the answers that you desperately seek. Those who reigned thousands of years ago might know something." Yangchen suddenly dispersed and rushed back into his body.

Aang stared at the spot where Yangchen had just been and then glanced down at the scroll still held in his hand. He groaned aloud, knowing that something - whether good or evil, he wasn't certain - was going to happen, sooner or later. But he did know now without a doubt that something or someone was coming, and he had the feeling that this new threat, this dark threat that Pathik had spoken of years ago, was coming directly for him. Pathik and Roku's warnings, the discovery of this scroll, everything that had happened: puzzle pieces were beginning to come together, but he didn't know what the final result would be.

But, just in case that he was wrong, he decided not to share his discoveries until he was absolutely certain he was right. He was only doing it because he didn't want to needlessly worry anyone. It had nothing to do with the fact that the Gaang had, in essence, basically abandoned him, nothing at all.

Knowing that he was lying to himself, but not really caring, Aang picked up the scroll and jumped out of the window into the courtyard below. Appa greeted him with a mighty roar and Momo wrapped himself around Aang's neck, the fur on his friend tickling his skin.

"Hey, you guys," he smiled at them. These two had been through it all with him, they had stood by his side, and they all had one thing in common: they were all the last of their kind.

During his travels, Aang had frequently searched for any creatures in similar appearance to his friends, even asking non-Airbenders, who had no idea what a Sky Bison or Winged Lemur actually looked like, if they had heard any rumors of creatures like Appa and Momo, or actually seen them. And just as he had always expected, they had always answered with the word 'no'.

Aang honestly, heartbreakingly had no idea what to do about that. At least for him, he could have children, as the Sages had kept on pestering him about since the Great War ended, but it was different for his friends. If there was no female Sky Bison or female Winged Lemurs in the entire world, then once Appa and Momo, spirits forbid, pass on, the race of Sky Bison and Winged Lemurs would become truly extinct, ceasing to exist.

Not wanting to ruminate over how close all the Children of Air, humans and animals, were to extinction, Aang sighed heavily. He had thought that once the Great War was over, he would finally be able to relax but problems have kept arising like invisible plagues, weighing Aang down until all that remained was a shard of the boy he once was.

He needed a vacation, and a long one, at that. Becoming excited at the thought, he looked at his friends, "What do you think, you guys? Does a vacation sound like a good idea?" A deafening roar from Appa and a shriek of agreement from Momo reached his ears, and Aang smiled, beginning to construct a suitable plan.

They would need to travel to a place where no one would ever expect them to be. He wanted to drop off the face of the world for at least a few months and none of the Air Temples would help him do just that. Ba Sing Se was then out, for the moment Appa was seen in the distance, the city would react, rumors of his arrival spreading like a fire itself. The Water Tribes would only try to garner his favor, offering viable brides to become the future Mother of the Air Nomads, and moreso, the North would only bicker that Sokka, their new heir, was only a non-bender instead of a Waterbender. So, that left the Fire Nation and it was the only sure bet, in all honesty, to accomplish what he had decided. Who would suspect that the Avatar would hide in the very nation that had slaughtered his own? No one and it would be perfect. He just needed to think of a
suitable place.

Ember Island.

If it had worked during the twilight of the Great War, surely it would work now. He glanced at his friends, realizing that it would take a little over two weeks to get there, so he would have to plan accordingly, especially for food.

There was also the matter of his appearance. The Air Nomads hadn't been a people who yearned to be forgotten, to only stay in the shadows, but Aang himself had evolved into that type of person.

He would need to blend in, for his tattoos weren't inconspicuous at all, especially his arrow. So, he'd have to grow his hair out and wear his headband, just as he had after the fall of Ba Sing Se and his mortal wounding from Azula. He grabbed his glider, the very same one that he had found when he was fixing up the Southern Temple, finding it in a room with dozens of other original airbending staffs. Although he was grateful for the Mechanic's creation of a staff on the Day of Black Sun, he would always prefer a true airbending glider.

He noticed Appa stand to his feet, intelligent eyes alert and determined and ready. Momo and looped himself on of Appa's horns, and with the scroll held tightly in his tattooed-hand, Aang leaped onto his friend's back, commanding him to begin the journey to the Fire Nation, to Ember Island.

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Appa sat down in the courtyard of Zuko's home on Ember Island and Aang hopped off, inhaling in relief as he gratefully stretched his legs. With a surprised eye, he appraised the place and noticed that it looked the same as it did eight years ago. Zuko, it seemed, clearly didn't like being at his family's old vacation home, so Aang thought that his friend wouldn't mind if he stayed there for a little bit, especially since no one in the Fire Nation would dare to be caught on the property.

Aang ran his hand through his black hair, and it still felt weird, no matter how much time had passed, but it did feel kind of nice, actually. One of the downsides to having his tattoos was that people always knew who he was and, inevitably, worshiped him. Although he always tolerated it, he didn't necessarily like it or think that he was deserving of it. It had been his fault that the Great War had become so blood-soaked in the first place. He was more deserving if the people cursed his name, not hailing him as a god. Looking at his reflection in an oval-shaped piece of ice that he had created, he determined that if he was wearing his headband, no one would ever recognize him as long as he kept the tattoos on his hands invisible. During the rare times he had had to stop and gather food for himself, Momo, and Appa in towns, nobody had looked at him twice. He had just been a regular human instead of the Master of the Four Elements. It had felt nice being normal. No one had known who he was, and now that he had finally arrived on Ember Island, he could finally take a much-needed break.

Appa grumbled at him and Aang laughed in amusement, watching his friend's eyelids already begin to droop. "Yes, go ahead, buddy. You're safe here, I promise, okay?" His best friend then immediately plopped himself down, and almost instantly, the Sky Bison was asleep.

Momo chattered at Aang drowsily and then curled himself around Appa's horn, eyes fluttering shut. Aang smiled and truly hoped that his fellow last-of-their-kind found females of their kind. After making certain that they would be undisturbed, he then turned around and entered the house.

The house was dark, eerie as the dust was thick in the air, and Aang felt the tissue around the scar on his back tighten in warning, foreboding whispering in his ears.
Ominous shadows were at the forefront in his mind and he cautiously called out, "Hello, I'm... Kuzon, a friend of Fire Lord Zuko's." No response was heard so he continued into the halls, eyes darting to and fro, taking note of the pictures on the wall, but ignoring them. After several moments, he felt the air currents shift.

There was someone right behind him.

Knowing that he was now in the presence of someone dangerous because not just anyone could sneak up on him, Aang slowly raised his arms and turned around. If this person became hostile, a viable threat to not just his life, but that of Appa's and Momo's, he was easily prepared to blow the intruder through the wall using airbending from his mouth.

When he finally faced the person, the first thought he had was how beautiful the woman was, the most strikingly attractive that he had ever seen. He loomed over her easily, eyes cataloging that her posture was tense, and he dimly wondered if Zuko had any cousins that he had never mentioned besides Iroh's son, Lu Ten. Who else besides the Fire Royal Family would be in the Fire Lord's home? When their eyes met, lightning exploded behind his lids, eyes beginning to see the past.


When he opened his eyes once more, surprised that he was even still alive, the sight of curious golden eyes greeted him, forcing him to realize that this wasn't a nightmare or an illusion. The golden eyes were the same as the ones that had stared him down smugly eight years ago. He knew those golden eyes, had envisioned them in his dreams for years. "Azula," he whispered, hysteria threatening to overwhelm him as memories of lightning ravaging his body assaulted his mind.

Her eyes widened slightly when he murmured her name, and then they narrowed, body tensing even further. When she didn't immediately attack him, he felt something unclench in his soul. Something was off. She had changed, and he wondered if Zuko had taken his advice and released the chi-blockers from his sister's service. He now didn't know what to do. Azula was obviously out of her prison, yet she hadn't killed him when she had had the chance, and Zuko would have sent a Warhawk if Azula had somehow escaped.

Realizing that the winds of fate had deemed this event more substantial than first glance, Aang slowly lowered his arms. Azula's eyes darted down and focused on the now-clearly-visible tattoos on his hands. "Avatar," she breathed, and fear was then carved into her face within a blink of the eye, the first time that he had ever seen such an expression on her lovely features. Her hands suddenly became alight with sapphire flames. "Zuko let me go," she said adamantly. "I didn't escape, he let me go." She enunciated clearly, golden eyes desperate.

When she didn't press an immediate attack after her declaration, Aang sighed. He had no idea that this would have happened when he decided to hide here. Perhaps fate was punishing him for trying to take a vacation. "And why on Devi's green Earth would Zuko do something like that?" He questioned politely, still prepared for an attack.

Azula snuffed out her flames and tilted her head up at him, "Because I needed to be, Avatar. My life was in danger."

Aang groaned inwardly, knowing that his vacation plans had just been eviscerated. "Very well, I would like to hear the details, then."

Kind of a short chapter, but I was content with how I ended it. Please, leave a review so I
can get feedback!

**So, Aang is all alone, save for Appa, Momo, and his past lives; pretty lonely. And yes, Aang did kill people in Canon. I think that it's completely illogical for one to deny it. Just look at the Northern Water Tribe during the Fire Nation invasion. After Zhao, the utter buffoon had killed the Moon Spirit, the Fire Nation's victory was assured until Aang goes into the Avatar State and *wipes out* their entire navy. How many men and women were on those ships? It was more than ten thousand, I'm pretty sure. And then, what about General Fong's Earth Kingdom base in *The Avatar State* episode? After Katara was 'drowned' under the Earth, thus triggering the Avatar State, Aang decimated the entire base, including all of the buildings, and healing huts. I'd reckon that people were occupying those shelters during that fiasco.

**I'm sure that you noticed, but I did use Guru Laghima's saying from *Legend of Korra* but changed some of the wording. I wanted Aang to discover True Flight because I think that if anyone could truly 'unlock' such an ability, it would be him.

Also, the true flight is the same thing Zaheer somehow unlocked in *Legend of Korra*. To be honest, I have never understood why people have made such a big deal about him unlocking that ability, even though it is pretty cool. We've seen the Sky Bison do the *exact same* thing in every episode of the series, and, plus, in *Ba Sing Se*, Aang did that exact thing as well, if you remember.

I enjoyed Zaheer as a villain, but it was ridiculous how he seemed to master airbending almost immediately. The only person that we know of, in Canon, who can do something like that is Aang himself, like when he was learning waterbending before Katara kind of ruined it for him, and that is because he's the Avatar and a natural prodigy, a genius when it comes to bending. "I've mastered the elements a thousand times in one thousand lifetimes, and now, I must do it once again."

Back to Zaheer, I liked the action scenes but his reasoning for his entire employment as a villain, at least to me, made no sense at all. Zaheer's rhetoric is something about freedom and only true freedom exists when darkness rules all and there is no government. So, he's basically an anarchist, but he doesn't even really have a good reason for being one, from what I've thought about. The reality is, is that he didn't get his way with the legal system during his younger years and decided to illogically declare that the entire system was corrupt because of his own bratty and petulant attitude. If you can offer some good insight into Zaheer's philosophy and actions that let me know that I'm completely wrong, I'd appreciate it because I truly enjoyed Zaheer except for his philosophy which seemed, at least to me, like that of a man-child's.

Tell me what you think, everybody!

*Stay safe*

*ButtonPusher*
Chapter 3

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Azula sipped her cup of tea and Aang waited patiently for her to begin.

After several moments, Azula looked out the window to stare at Agni's setting light. "I've been imprisoned for years now," she began, voice as strong as he had always remembered, but there was something different about it – it lacked a certain cold and predatory quality. "But I would've been released a few years ago if it wasn't for the Earth Kingdom. Zuzu feared that if he released me, it would restart the Great War." She frowned.

Aang nodded in understanding, "Yes, I know, your brother and I have spoken at lengths about it. It was even my idea to give you your firebending back, releasing the chi-blockers from your service."

"Yes, and I thank you truly, Avatar," she gazed at him intently, golden eyes roaming his face, searching for something. "It was a gift beyond all others, but yet I don't know why you convinced Zuzu to do it." Some desperation had begun to seep into her tone, startling him. "Why? You should despise me after everything I did to you – and your little group, too."

"While your actions were detestable," he said bluntly, surprising her. "You were only a child, a daughter who only wanted to please her father. And, plus, you're not the only child who made mistakes during the Great War – and even before the Great War had started." He whispered, gray eyes flashing with memories of all the people he had ended up dooming to certain death because he had run away from the Southern Air Temple, and images of his people burning.

She nodded, seeming to understand that she would have better luck in convincing him to believe her if she didn't press him about his own 'mistakes' made. "Anyway, Zuzu feared another Great War, one that he couldn't win."

Aang sighed because he probably knew the situation better than she did, or maybe he didn't. After all, Azula had always seemed to know everything when she had been hunting him all of those years ago.

When he had first stayed in the Fire Nation after the Great War, he and Zuko had spoken about his sister and how the Fire Lord needed to handle the situation with the utmost care, specifically provoking his familial loyalty to his sister, and how the Earth Kingdom would, no doubt, want to put her on trial for her accomplishment of conquering Ba Sing Se.

And he had been right, for when the Great War had ended, and after months of brutal and harsh negotiations began, the other nations had finally demanded their reparations. The Water Tribes had wanted a small fleet of Fire Nations ships for each Tribe, whereas the Earth Kingdom, and Ba Sing Se specifically, would only accept the conquerors of Ba Sing Se. Knowing that Kuei had every right to demand such a thing, Aang had first agreed with the King of the great city of Ba Sing Se. But when he had actually visited Azula, the conqueror of Ba Sing Se, he had been appalled to see how far her once-beautiful mind had deteriorated. She hadn't even blinked at him when he had stepped into her cell. Her eyes had shone with a blankness, emptiness and he doubted that she had even known who he was, or that he had even been there.

Realizing that he wouldn't allow Azula then to be sent over to Ba Sing Se, he had advised Zuko to...
use his sister's mental health as a weapon. Zuko then contacted King Kuei and told him of his decision, citing that he refused to hand over his sister because he didn't want her to kill any innocents because her health was unpredictable. Instead, Zuko was forced to hand over Mai and Ty Lee, but they had, unfortunately, 'escaped' before their journey in chains to Ba Sing Se.

Kuei had hesitantly accepted the offer and the matter seemed forgotten, but now Aang realized that it wasn't. The Earth Kingdom had been biding its time, waiting for the right moment to strike, specifically when Zuko was most vulnerable and would be willing to condemn his only sister to an undoubted painful death. "So, your brother just let you go?" He asked almost incredulously, "I find that hard to believe, I truly do, especially since all of the guards would know about it."

She then smirked at him, the sight reminiscent of the girl she had used to be, but different at the same time. "My, Avatar, you are naïve. And to answer your question: well, not exactly." Her head tilted to the side, golden eyes locking onto his gray ones.

Azula looked up when her door opened and Zuzu walked in, immediately noticing his condition. Paranoia was carved into his features, golden eyes darting to the door almost every second. He wasn't wearing his crown, and his shaggy black hair tumbled down to his shoulders in natural curls, and it brutally reminded her of how he had used to look after Ba Sing Se's subjugation, of how they had been reunited, the two children of Ozai and Ursa, the newest branch of the Royal House of Agni, the next generation of Fire Nation Royal Bloodline. But then he had decided to join the Avatar after Azula had given him everything.

Her eyes narrowed, "What's wrong?" She demanded, "What do you want?"

Zuzu didn't hesitate as he stepped closer to her, "You have to get out of here, all right? If I don't hand you over to the Earth Kingdom, they will declare war, even Omashu, and the Water Tribes will unsurprisingly join them. I cannot afford another war, not at all; the Fire Nation would be defeated, and we both know that the Children of Fire would soon become extinct just as the Air Nomads if they are under Earth and Water rule." He said bluntly.

"Then amass the army and crush them, brother," she leaned forward. "Surely you weren't... stupid enough to dismantle the Fire Nation's military; it's the strongest in the world." When her brother didn't say anything, her eyes widened in disbelief. "You didn't!"

He swallowed, "I did dismantle almost all of it, and while it had seemed like a good idea at the time, I recognize now that it was a great mistake."

"And uncle let you do something so unwise? I find that hard to fathom."

Zuzu clenched his fists, sparks of flames appearing but Azula wasn't impressed. "Uncle wasn't here during that time; he was at his fucking tea shop, the Jasmine Dragon," he hissed with no small amount of bitterness, and Azula realized that their uncle had chosen poorly for his place of permanent residence. "Out of anyone who advised me, the Avatar was the only one who I trusted, and when he warned me that disassembling most of the Fire Nation's army would be imprudent, and rather counseled me to dismantle half the military but increase the number of actual soldiers per each unit, I neglected to listen, wondering how an Air Nomad, the very person who let our father live, could say such a thing." Her brother rubbed his forehead, "I had thought the mushrooms he had eaten were poor in quality, so I discarded his words."

Azula raised her brow at how smart the Avatar, that little boy who she had battled eight years ago, was and, at the same time, wondered how her brother could have been so dim-witted, but she couldn't change the past, only instead work to secure her future. "Okay, so then why did you say that I have to get out of here? Has that spineless Kuei finally grown a backbone, brother mine?"
"King Kuei of Ba Sing Se has announced – quite forcefully, I might add – that you, the Princess Azula, be handed over at once to Ba Sing Se. It seems that my attempts to stay their hand have finally lost their luster, and Kuei will undoubtedly put you on trial in front of the entire city and have you executed, probably publicly." She was unsurprised by the news, but what did surprise her was the fierce glow in her brother's eyes. "And that's something that I refuse to allow to happen."

She smirked, "And you are attempting to rescue me, Zuzu, isn't that right? How very big brother of you. You truly take being the older sibling seriously." She said sweetly.

Zuzu grit his teeth, "I will probably never forgive you for some of the things that you've done, this included," he tapped his chest where her lightning strike had hit, and a fresh wave of guilt did spread through her mind. "And while you have made good progress, especially with mother, I don't trust you." He paused and sighed, pulling his hand through his hair. "But you're my little sister and I love you. You will not face Kuei's ire, nor that of the Earth Kingdom's, I promise."

Emotions welled within her at his words, and she realized that she was truly thankful to have such a man as her brother, "Thank you, Zuzu," she whispered, not wanting him to see how affected she was by his words.

He straightened his posture and Azula knew that he was about to divulge his true reason for his impromptu visit, "I cannot help you, and I truly believe, truly do, that when the guards change shifts just before dawn tomorrow and no one replaces them for several minutes, it would just be bad scheduling and a coincidence." Their golden eyes locked, "I will need to rectify that oversight, but I think that it will take a few days to do so, don't you?" He stared at her.

Azula smiled, halfway in awe of her brother, who had once been unable to think that way. "Look at you, Zuzu, so cunning. I love it! I'm so proud of you," she clapped her hands slowly and stood to her feet, the candles wavering as she walked past them towards her brother.

Zuzu watched her warily but didn't stop her. He tensed when she suddenly hugged him but, eventually, hugged her in return, arms wrapping around her back.

"Thank you, Zuko, thank you," she whispered into his ear. "You are a good brother, a better sibling than I am." She closed her eyes and leaned away, pulling back as she returned to her bed, sitting down gracefully.

"You know, I hear that Ember Island is nice this time of year, have you heard?" Zuzu asked after the shock had finally worn off, but remnants were still shining in his eyes, though.

She glared at him, "Absolutely not! That place is too depressing," she hissed out emphatically, golden eyes flashing.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he conceded, "but it's a perfect place for someone to get away when they have nowhere else to go." He said pointedly, his one eyebrow raised.

Azula sighed, knowing that he was right, but she would never admit it aloud, least of all to his face. She had already admitted several truths to him that she had sworn never to reveal, so she doubted her vow would hold. "We'll see, Zuzu, we'll see."

"And I hope that you see it's the only option, Azula,"

She quickly changed the subject, "And I assume that mother knows all about this?" The expression on his face revealed the truth and she laughed, "Oh, Zuzu, if you haven't told her, then I suppose you'll find out what it feels like to be the least favorite child."
He sighed, "I didn't tell her because her emotions would cloud her judgment and if that brings her ire upon me, so be it. She loves you fiercely, you know? Although I know that both pain and hurt linger for you both from the past, it doesn't always have to be that way. When you see mother again, you might just be relieved that she's okay."

"Are you a seer now, brother?" She asked mockingly, "Tell me of my fate, would you? What do you see when you stroke my palm?"

Zuzu rolled his eyes and turned to go but hesitated, features wavering. He then turned back around and smiled slightly at her, "Good luck, sister, good luck," he said, his smile genuine. "I am not a seer, not at all, but I don't need to be one to know that your mark on this world has not been finished. Your fate isn't to die by the Earth Kingdom's hands, nor is it to remain in a cell for the rest of your life. Your name will echo throughout history and it won't be because of your crimes, but something else entirely." His eyes shone with a knowledge that she didn't possess, and she yearned for it as fire yearned for air.

Azula then watched as her brother exited the room and heard the door shut. Quickly, her golden eyes flared with fire, her lips pulling into a smile. She couldn't wait until dawn.

Azula sipped her tea again and Aang observed her, feeling her heartbeat with his earthbending and monitoring her breathing. Both were completely even and had not elevated at all during her tale. He remembered how Toph hadn't even been able to know if Azula had been lying when the Princess had declared that she was a four hundred-foot tall purple Platypus Bear with pink horns and silver wings, and now, he was in the same position, but he was better equipped to deal with Azula than anyone else. Although she was immensely dangerous, probably one of the most dangerous people in the world, she wouldn't be a true threat to him, especially since he would be guarded around her. She could be lying, but he found that conclusion unlikely. If she had, in fact, escaped, then Zuko would have immediately messaged him.

Aang pursed his lips and then sighed heavily, "Okay," he shrugged and glanced out the window, towards where Appa and Momo were sleeping.

She looked at him in shock, "That's it? No questions? Nothing?" She paused and then looked at him, smiling. "I could have killed those guards."

Aang wasn't impressed, "Did you?" He questioned with a raised brow.

Azula seemed to deflate, "No," she grumbled.

"And I didn't think so," he declared. "Based on what you told me, the guards would have left a few minutes length of time for you to escape. If everything had gone without a hitch, and considering that it's you, it did go without a hitch, then you would have stumbled across no guards and wouldn't have had to kill them."

Her eyes were wide before a smirk curved across her face, "My, Avatar, you are intelligent," she seemed impressed.

Aang let a smile slip at her expression and she caught it, gazing at him as if for the first time.

His smile dropped and his eyes were drawn to her full lips. He was abruptly reminded that Azula had grown into a beautiful and alluring woman and that while he was the Avatar, hailed as a god by most, he was still only a man, a man who was in the presence of the most stunning woman he had ever seen.

Azula seemed to understand his train of thought and smiled, "Do you see something that you like,
Avatar?" She purred, golden eyes gleaming.

Aang blinked at swiftly stood up, needing to diffuse a potentially disastrous situation. "Princess Azula, I'm going to go feed Appa, my Sky Bison. Please, if you would, let me know if you need anything from Ember Island. I would be happy to retrieve any items or food that you need." He all but raced out the room, but paused in the entryway, "I won't remove your bending or report you to the authorities unless you attempt to attack me or kill my Sky Bison and Winged Lemur, I swear." He smiled towards her sitting form, "You will be safe here, Princess Azula, I promise." Aang turned around and then jumped through the window so that he was in the courtyard. He didn't know if he would regret that promise, but he did know one thing: everyone deserved a second chance, even Azula.

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After feeding Appa, Aang quickly journeyed down to the beach and gazed out over the moonlit water. He began practicing complicated waterbending forms and found the rhythmic motions soothing, wondering if any of the Water Avatars to ever exist had loved waterbending as much as he loved airbending.

With his earthbending, he felt Azula step outside and walk down to where he was. She aligned herself next to him and watched silently as he bent the water.

"You're different," she stared at the water held in midair.

Aang knew that she was right but was still curious, especially since the woman was once his greatest enemy; he had been warier of coming across Azula than he ever had against Ozai. "And how's that?" He asked softly.

"Well, besides the obvious physical changes, which are very nice," she smirked up at him and Aang abruptly lost control of the water as it fell from his grip into the water with an audible loud splash.

Aang turned to her, baffled by her forwardness, but knew that he shouldn't be. Her mirth was apparent, glowing in her eyes, and he shook his head, releasing a few huffs of laughter. "Okay, and besides that, what else is different?"

Azula hummed and looked back over the ocean, "You have a new edge to you, darker and more intense in some ways. And while you're the Avatar, which means that you hold power and knowledge lost to the sands of time, your eyes are heavy, ancient even. You are older now, and I don't just mean physically." She gazed up into his grey eyes.

He sighed, "I matured, and life happened," he didn't want to have a conversation of his frayed emotions with Azula, the woman who had hunted him across the Earth Kingdom with a tenacity that had, at times, seemed to have outpaced Zuko's.

"Yeah, it tends to do that I've found," she didn't press and Aang was grateful, shocked that she could avoid the subject. He sank down into the sand and Azula followed.

"Yes, it does,"

They stayed together in silence. Aang was surprised to find that it felt nice. He wondered if Azula somehow understood what he was feeling, his unraveled emotions, and if she actually did, he felt a sort of kinship that someone did, even if it was with her.

She then broke the silence, "How can you just sit there calmly? How are you able to even look at me?" Azula's voice was quiet, almost shaky. "I shot you with lightning and tried so many times to
kill you. I made your life… miserable," her fists were clenched at the end and she seemed to almost loathe herself.

He decided to return the favor for when she had complimented his looks, "I can look at you because you are breathtakingly beautiful," he joked, but immediately regretted it when she glared at him.

"I know that but how can you look at me? No matter my beauty, the sight of me should repulse you, Avatar. Yet, it doesn't seem to, and I want to know why that is."

"I've forgiven you," Aang said simply.

Azula shook her head, "That's not good enough! How could you ever forgive me?" She seemed so desperate all of sudden, fingers clenching into fists, and Aang decided to explain.

"You made me better, a better fighter and a more efficient Avatar. When you shot me with lightning, it was agonizing, I won't lie to you, but it also made me realize how rash my actions up to that point had been." Aang turned and looked at her tensed form, "I forgave you because everyone deserves a second chance, even you. I forgave Zuko, so I can forgive you, and I didn't kill your father when I had more reasons to slay him than I do to choose not to forgive you. I chose to forgive Avatar Roku, my predecessor, even though his inactions led to my people's slaughter."

She pulled her lips into a smirk, but Aang could easily see the vulnerability hidden underneath. "And if I don't want to change?" She questioned lightly.

He shrugged, "That's fine, Princess Azula, it's your life. You can choose how you want history to remember you. I'm not going to force you into anything."

Azula looked at him in disbelief, "You can't be serious."

Aang chuckled, "I would definitely prefer if you chose to walk a new path because I think that you have potential that most of the world doesn't, but, ultimately, it's your decision." Aang looked back to the water and waited for her reply.

He wasn't disappointed.

"Well, if Zuzu can change, so can I." Azula declared.

Aang smiled at her, "Good choice, I'm glad that chose correctly," he praised.

Her eyes challenged him, "And I thought that it was my decision?"

"Yes, it was, but I think that you chose correctly. Haven't you heard, Princess Azula? The good guys always eventually win."

A small laugh escaped her lips before she quieted, looking at him seriously. "So, how does this 'being-good-thing' work?" She questioned.

Aang honestly had no idea if she was kidding. He looked at her and she simply stared back at him, awaiting his instructions. He inhaled slowly and said, "We'll take it one step at a time."

Azula nodded and looked back at the water. The sun had fully set, and Yue was plainly visible over the beach, her presence reaching out to Aang. He then watched as his once-bitter enemy unexpectedly stood up, "I'm going to eat," she declared and didn't wait for his answer, walking back to the house. After several moments, she stopped a few feet away and unsurely looked back.
at him, "Um… and would you like something, Avatar?"

He smiled at her attempt at 'being good' and stood up, "I'll come in with you," he offered, walking past her and he used his earthbending to see if she was following. When he found that she wasn't, he turned around, waving her forward "Are you coming?"

Azula started and looked at him, then smirked, "Definitely, Avatar," she quickly caught up with him and, together, they made their way to the house.

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He watched Azula as she ate the Komodo Chicken off her plate. He wasn't the only person who had changed, echoing her own observations from earlier. She was still very much the same person he had remembered her being, but there were differences between then and now, subtle but large at the same time. Well, the main one was that she wasn't trying to kill him and didn't wish him harm, but now, watching as she ate her meal, she also seemed almost… peaceful. He realized that she was being herself, which Aang now realized she hadn't ever really been able to do. She always had to dawn a mask of superiority and aloofness, had to be Princess Azula instead of just Azula, her true self, the one who she had stuffed down for so long that eventually led to her mind breaking.

He was truly relieved that she had healed from her insanity; it had been heartbreaking to see a beautiful mind succumb to such deterioration.

Aang remembered the first time he had ever seen her, in Omashu during that hostage exchange gone-wrong. Two things had immediately stood out to him: well, the first one had been how beautiful she was, possibly the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, and second, was that he sensed how she hadn't felt peace in a long time, if ever. It had actually been the same with Zuko when he had first met the now-Fire Lord at the South Pole, except Zuko was much angrier than Azula.

After hearing stories of Ozai, and fighting the man during Sozin's Comet, Aang could easily see how she had never been able to have that freedom to simply be herself instead of the weapon that Ozai had molded her into. Now that she was free from her father and since Zuko had secretly released her, Aang was determined to let her experience inner peace.

Azula noticed his staring and raised a brow, "What?"

He shrugged, "Nothing," he didn't want to ruin this peaceful atmosphere.

Her eyes narrowed but she let the matter go. She continued to eat her chicken with gusto. And at the sight, Aang shook his head and sighed inwardly. He knew that many of the old Air Nomad customs and beliefs were going to die with him, but it was depressing to know that he would be the last Air Nomad vegetarian. It seemed more apparent now than ever, having his first meal with another human in years, especially since he had never encountered another vegetarian in the years since his awakening. Well, except for Pathik, but he didn't count.

Aang stared at the green leaves adorning his plate and grimaced, not feeling the urge to eat any longer. Azula noticed, as she seemed to notice everything, and put down her plate of chicken, "Not hungry?" She quipped.

Aang shook his head, "Not really," he wasn't willing to give anything more than that and Azula seemed fine with his lack of a detailed response.

Once she was finished, Azula stood up and looked at him. "Well, since it's late and I finished my meal, I'm going to succumb to my yearn for rest. So, um…good night," she said awkwardly and
made her way out of the room.

"Good night, Princess Azula," Aang watched her leave, making certain that she was being honest and felt her enter a room with his earthbending. Since he didn't want to eat, and couldn't think of anything else to do, he decided to talk with Roku.

After snuffing out the burning candles, he went out to the beach again and sat in the Lotus Position, briefly waving at Yue. Once he closed his eyes and inhaled slowly and deeply, Roku appeared within seconds, summoned from the fathomless depths of his soul.

"Aang," his predecessor nodded his head.

Aang did the same, "I found this airbending scroll in the Southern Air Temple's Library, and it details how an Airbender can achieve true flight without the use of a glider." He pulled the scroll out of his sack and held it up to Roku.

Roku looked skeptical, but when Aang shook it in his head for emphasis, his predecessor's hands became tangible and he reached out, taking a hold of the scroll. The more that Roku read, Aang noticed, the more that his past life's surprise was evident. "Gyatso had always spoken of legends with such an ability, but I had never believed him, and frankly, I'm not even sure that he himself ever believed them." Roku handed the scroll back and looked thoughtfully out over the moonlit water as his hands became ethereal once more.

Aang knew that he shouldn't feel surprised that Gyatso had known stories about this ability, but he honestly was, nonetheless. He had no idea how his master had always seemed to know everything, in spite of his relatively young age.

"You have spoken with Yangchen." It wasn't a question, but a statement of a fact.

He nodded. "Yes, and she didn't say much except that I should delve deeper into the Avatar Cycle." He looked to where Roku was staring, "She also never believed the legends," he said softly.

Roku turned back towards him, eyes curious, "Why come to me, then, Aang?" He questioned, "You knew that I would be of no help, yet you summoned me anyway. Why?"

Aang closed his eyes. "I'm not really... comfortable communicating with the other Avatars." He admitted shyly, feeling shame that he couldn't even, in essence, talk to himself.

Roku laughed, the sound echoing across the beach, "Oh, Aang, I used to feel like that. Don't worry, my friend, I only ever communicated with Avatar Kyoshi a few times during my reign. I summoned Avatar Kuruk once and never did so again because he... was hard to communicate with, to put it nicely." His past life quieted, eyes serious. "But, in spite of that, you cannot let this baseless fear hold you back from deciphering this puzzle. I have a feeling that it will become much simpler than what you think once you begin to unlock the ability." Roku gazed at him for several moments, "What is truly bothering you, Aang?"

He sighed, wondering how he could have possibly believed that he could hide things from Roku. "When I was in Ba Sing Se and I went into the Avatar State, I was floating, no bubble of air. I was weightless."

"Then that means that one or more of our predecessors had mastered this ability." Roku summoned.

"Yes, I know, but I'm wondering how far back I have to go." Aang gestured to himself in wonder, "Can I even summon past Avatars from thousands of years ago?"
Roku chuckled. "You can go as far back as you want or need to, my friend. It takes a lot of spiritual concentration, which you have in abundance, more so than any other Avatar, I believe, but it's relatively simple."

"How far back did you ever go?" Aang questioned curiously. "You mentioned that you had summoned Kuruk, but did you go back further? What about Yangchen?"

"Yes, I did communicate with Avatar Yangchen, but to answer your first question, I only went back to Avatar Jinzhai, the Fire Avatar before myself." Roku smiled at him, hints of self-loathing evident. "I never really cared much for the spiritual side of our power during my reign, quite like Avatar Kuruk in that regard, I hate to say. It wasn't until I was much older when I truly invested my time in that part of our duty. Who knows? Maybe if I had been spiritual like you, Aang, I would have known what was to come, and could have had the wisdom to stop Fire Lord Sozin and the Great War before it even began by any means necessary."

Aang was quiet for several moments, digesting his predecessor's words. "How far back do you think that I should go?"

"Well, I would probably say a thousand years but that was when Yangchen was Avatar." Roku frowned, eyes closing in rumination. "Avatar Jinzhai wouldn't know, so I would say that you must try going back around fifteen hundred years, give or take a few decades if you truly wish to solve this puzzle that the winds of fate have given you."

Aang nodded, "Thank you, Roku,"

His past life nodded, "I, and any of the other Avatars, will always answer any questions that you may have and give advice to the best of our ability. All you must do is simply ask, my friend. Farewell, Avatar Aang." Roku smiled and then faded into Aang's body.

He stared up at Yue, smiling up at her as she waved down at him, features pulled into a beautiful, bright smile. "What do you think, Moon Spirit?" He called out, "Do you know anything?"

"Avatar Aang, I am displeased not to be of any help to you; I don't know." She floated towards him, white hair incandescent. "Only those who actually mastered this ability you speak of would know the knowledge that you seek."

He nodded, "All right, thank you, Yue." He then headed back to the house, deciding that he would summon an Avatar from before Jinzhai tomorrow. He wanted to decipher this mystery sooner than later.

He saw his meal still on the table and quickly consumed it, finding that he was hungry now. After only minutes, he ate the last of the lettuce and went into the room that he used during the Great War. He wondered briefly if the room that Azula resided in belonged to her from when she was a child but dismissed the thought.

With a wave of his hand, all the candles in the room came to life, casting a warm and comforting glow across the room and Aang knew that he was going to fall asleep quickly, finding the fact that Azula slept in the same house as he did not-worrying. He climbed into the bed and closed his eyes.

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Aang awoke to a piercing scream, his eyes snapping open in alarm. He bolted out of the bed, instincts flaring, searching for potential threats, ready to blast anyone out of the room with all of the elements. After a second, he noticed that no one was in his room. He then heard the scream
again and he realized that Azula was in the house, too, so it must have been from her. He quickly
followed the sound and to his surprise, it led him to the room Katara had used during the Great
War before Sozin's Comet. Aang was certain that there was some sort of irony in that fact, but he
didn't think too hard about it. He had more important things to worry about.

He heard the scream again and he yanked the door open, a flame held in his hand. His gray eyes
effortlessly adjusted, and he saw that Azula was thrashing on the bed, writhing and cringing as she
muttered unintelligibly, sweat spilling down her lovely features. His eyes widened when he
realized that this wasn't a ploy so that he would let his guard down for her to have a chance to
attack him, and he rushed over. "Princess Azula!" He shook her multiple times, but to no effect.
"Wake up!" He cried out, but she didn't respond and Aang saw only one option - he blasted her
with frigid air.

She suddenly gasped, lips parted in a soundless scream as her eyes snapped open, and just by the
almost feral gleam in her eye, he knew that he needed to move. It was only Aang's airbending
reflexes that had saved him from the blasts of blue fire headed straight for his face. "Princess
Azula," he cautiously looked over at her when she finally seemed coherent.

She was panting and staring at him with wide eyes, and she quickly tried to pull herself together;
she was not successful. "Thank you, Avatar," she said with a waving hand, dismissing him.

Aang frowned, "You're welcome," he paused and observed her pale face, "Do you want to talk
about it?" He asked gently.

She whirled towards him, eyes glowing. "No!" Azula snarled, glaring at him with the force of her
great-grandfather's comet, "I'm not some damsel-in-distress for you to come to save and comfort
and then fuck, Avatar!"

Aang put his hands up in an attempt to showcase that wasn't his intention at all. "I never thought
that, okay? If I gave you that impression, I'm truly sorry, and I can see now that my words from
earlier about your beauty must have contributed to your conclusion. Also, I wasn't trying to make
you feel weak. If I did, I'm sorry. I fiercely apologize, if that is true." When she didn't say
anything, Aang stared at her seriously, "Sometimes, you know, it helps to talk about your
dreams."

Azula's glare had lessened but her disdain about the idea was evident, "That would never help.
That's a ridiculous notion," she waved her hand in disgust.

Aang paused and stared out the window, "Before the Great War, before I had even known that I
was the Avatar, I kept having the same dream every night... for years." He didn't glance at Azula,
but he instinctively knew that he had her full attention, so he continued. "It was of the comet, of
what would be called 'Sozin's Comet'. I didn't know what it was then but now, I know that it was
Sozin's Comet; I'd wager every drop of gold in the entire world that it was your great-grandfather's
comet." He swallowed as he closed his eyes, the memories of his younger self waking up in terror
almost every night at the forefront of his mind. "And it would always be the same, the dream. I
would be in the courtyard, surrounded by my fellow Airbenders in an intense game of air-ball.
Then, the comet appeared out of nowhere, bathing the sky in a deep red, and everyone else
besides me backed away in fear." He shuddered out a breath, staring up into the sky, envisioning
Sozin's Comet blazing through the heavens. "You see, I was drawn to the comet, I guess that it
was the Firebender in me, and walked towards it, arm stretched out to just touch it." His fists
shook and the air in the room began to gain power, beginning to swirl and lash out, but Aang
didn't care. His mind was trapped in the memories of that accursed nightmare, and throughout it
all, he continued to speak. "But when I got closer, the fire from the comet consumed me, eating
me alive, trying to ravage my flesh until nothing except ash remained. Such terrible panic and
terror and horror would then blanket my mind, and I would blast the fiery comet with air, but that
just made it stronger, made it angrier." Several tears spilled down his cheeks and the air began to calm, "At this moment, every time in my dreams, I would look around and see my fellow Air Nomads, all of them, burning alive, blood-curdling screams erupting from their charred faces, and that is when I would wake up. And it was always the same no matter what I did, every single time." He turned around to look at Azula, "I never told anyone about my dreams, but if I had done so, simply speaking up, I might have been able to save my people."

Azula stared at him for several moments, "I dreamt of Ozai," she admitted, and Aang wasn't surprised by her admission. He had had a feeling that the dream entailed the self-declared Phoenix King. She continued, "It was mostly just memories, but their sinister intent was to terrorize. He had always demanded perfection and I had always striven to deliver, to please that... bastard." Blue flames sparked across her fingertips, "Once mother had disappeared, he became much worse because with mother no longer around to soothe his temper, he would regularly beat us, me and Zuko. That's how I became such a good liar, actually. You see, I would break the rules and would always blame it on Zuko instead of being honest about it. I was weak, and I was a terrible sister." Azula's fists clenched, "Our screams never deterred him. In fact, they always seemed to amuse him."

The air in the room suddenly became aggressive, more violent than when he had been recounting his dreams, whipping out at anything and anyone. Aang's jaw was clenched and he was so angry he was afraid the Avatar State would make an appearance; he hadn't been this angry in years. "He got off easy," he hissed out. "If I had known how monstrous he truly was, I may have quarreled less with the idea of killing him during Sozin's Comet."

Azula stared up at his shaking form in disbelief. "You are angry at my suffering?" She sounded fascinated, eyes wide, and Aang feared that if he spoke, his voice would be amplified by all those who had come before him, so he settled for nodding his head to answer her question. "But it's my pain, not yours. I'm not your family and I tried to kill you several times." Azula was incredulous. Aang breathed deeply to calm himself, "No one should ever suffer like that, especially from your own family." He stated quietly, but adamantly.

A tiny smile graced Azula's lips and she suddenly laughed, "No one has ever said that to me before! I had always thought that it was normal to be beaten by your father." His rage brimmed over at her words, and his eyes and tattoos glowed a blinding light for a split second. But before he destroyed all of Ember Island, he called upon the calm of his predecessors to soothe his mind and was rewarded when serenity spread throughout his body, soothing his fury. Azula opened her eyes once the light had faded. "Why did you do that? By the way, what is that? It was the same thing that you did in Ba Sing Se before I... shot you with lightning." Shame colored her voice.

"So that I wouldn't lose myself in anger and destroy the entire island." He replied, "And to answer your second question, that was the Avatar State. You don't know what that is?" He tilted his head, baffled by the notion.

Azula shook her head, "No, I don't know what the Avatar State, as you called it, is. Nobody really knows anything about the Avatar's power save the Avatar themselves."

Aang raised an eyebrow in wonder. He had always thought that it was almost common knowledge what the Avatar State was, but he was incredibly thankful that it wasn't. Now, nobody could end the Avatar Cycle prematurely, as the woman in front of him had almost done eight years ago. "Well, The Avatar State is a defense mechanism, designed to empower the Avatar – me – with all of the skills, power, and knowledge from all of the previous Avatars. The glow is the combination of all my past lives focusing their power and energy through my body. In the Avatar State, I'm at my most powerful."
"That is incredible," she breathed, looking awed and unafraid, something which relieved him more than she would probably ever know. The expressions of fear and dread on the Gaang’s faces whenever the Avatar State was mentioned were still vivid in his mind. He was tired of people being afraid of him. "No wonder we were taught in the Academy to always fear the Avatar; nobody can hold a candle to your power. Now, you are stronger than you were when you were a child in the Great War, and I can't even fathom how powerful you are now." And again, no fear was present on her face, but an overwhelming curiosity and the realization that she couldn't defeat him in a battle.

"I am much stronger than I used to be," he said simply.

Azula nodded and looked at her disgruntled bed, at the sweat-soaked covers. "I don't think that I’ll be able to sleep again," she sighed aloud, displeasure carved into her features.

"I could stay in here with you," he impulsively offered.

Her head snapped in his direction, eyes locking with his own, staring at him critically "On the floor?"

Aang smiled, "On the floor," to show that he was being truthful, Aang spread out across the floor. "Thank you, Avatar," she said softly.

"And thank you, Princess," at her questioning look, he elaborated. "Thank you for listening, it meant a lot." When she still looked bemused, he decided to be honest. "I haven't spoken with another person face-to-face in years, only through messages."

Her eyes widened, but she didn't press him, for which he was thankful. "You're welcome, Avatar, and even though I already said it, I must say it again. Thank you, especially for sharing such dark details of your life. Nobody has ever trusted me with such intimate secrets, and I promise you that I won't betray that trust. And thank you for offering to sleep on the floor, nobody has done that either."

Aang shook his head, "I trust you, and it's not a problem, don't worry. I've slept on worst," he laid on the floor and closed his eyes. Tomorrow, he would heed Roku's advice and speak with one of their past lives, but now, he yearned for sleep and his mind finally complied.

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Aang silently lowered himself down on the deck and closed his eyes, searching deep in his soul. He immediately felt Roku, Kyoshi, Kuruk, and Yangchen. The feel of their soothing presences gave him the strength to go deeper. He then felt another being who was similar to Roku and knew that he had found Avatar Jinzhai. While he was tempted to speak with him, he decided that he could do that at a later time. He searched further, bypassing Jinzhai, and then felt a stubborn presence, recognizing that this newfound presence was the Earth Avatar before Kyoshi. He summoned the presence forward and opened his eyes.

He was met with the sight of a man that looked a lot like General Fong. He had a full beard and seemed to carry himself with a military-like bearing. He was wearing mostly green but had colors of all the nations in his clothing. In fact, a single stripe of the colors from the other nations ran down his chest.

"Hello, Avatar Aang. I am Avatar Boruk," his voice was a booming baritone.

Aang nodded in greeting, "Hello, Avatar Boruk, it is an honor to meet you. Have you ever heard of the ability true flight for airbending?"
Boruk rubbed his beard, his voice gravelly. "Only tales, my friend. When I was training at the Northern Air Temple, a few of the Elders often spoke of an age, a few centuries before my own birth, when such an ability had been used to terrifying effect."

"What do you mean?"

"This Airbender was unnamed, his very name erased from any record in Air Nomad history, but I do know that he existed in the time of my predecessor, Avatar Keska. From what I did gather, this unnamed Airbender's philosophy revolved around that without, first, the destruction of the old, new growth cannot ever exist."

Aang shook his head, "A dark and dangerous philosophy," he commented.

"Yes, it was, and the philosophy, from what I know, consumed him. It was he, the very first non-Avatar, who discovered true flight, the very secret to weightlessness. As a result, he became untethered to the Earth, existing only in the heavens amongst the Creatures borne of Air."

"What happened? Why was his name erased from Air Nomad history?"

"Well, he lived the remainder of his life without ever touching the ground, but because of this, his head was literally 'in the clouds', so to speak. He was delusional. He looked down at the Four Nations like a god, like he was the Avatar herself, and dared to challenge what he shouldn't have. It became too much for him, and when the time came, he swooped down and attacked innocents, murdering them in cold blood, trying to purge the old and bring forth a new, harvest-full growth. Almost immediately, though, Avatar Keska put a stop to it, killing him when he refused to tether himself back to the Earth."

Aang wondered if he did actually manage to master true flight, would he become crazy. He already knew how fragile his psyche was after the Gaang had pretty much abandoned him and all of the grief over being the last of the Air Nomads. Would he then be remembered as, not the boy who had single-handedly triumphed over the Fire Nation, but as the Mad Balance-Keeper upon his death?

When he saw Boruk staring at him curiously, he sighed, "So, you've never seen this, I take it?" He held up the airbending scroll.

Boruk squinted at the scroll, "No. I have never seen that scroll before." He shook his head.

"Well, do you know who might have, or who had even crafted it? From what it sounds like, this unnamed Airbender was unlikely to have created this scroll, detailing the ability. Who else, though, could have? You mentioned that this unnamed Airbender was the first non-Avatar to discover the secret to weightlessness, and since the Avatar State allows me access to true flight, wouldn't it, possibly, be one of your predecessors had fashioned it?" He questioned.

Boruk frowned, opened his mouth, but paused when Azula suddenly shuffled into the room.

She stared at the sight before her, surprise evident on her face before she recovered remarkably quickly. "Hello, there," she smirked. "And who are you?" She looked at Boruk with a raised eyebrow.

Boruk stood up and bowed with the Fire Nation sign of respect, "I am Avatar Boruk, young one."

Azula seemed impressed by his show of respect and knowledge of Fire Nation traditions. She then looked at Aang, "So, you can just talk to any of the past Avatars at any time that you wish to?"
Aang shrugged, "Yeah, pretty much," he looked at Boruk. He was surprised that Azula was able to actually see and communicate with him. He had never summoned his predecessors in front of an audience.

She looked like she wanted to ask more but instead, she turned around and stepped towards the door, "I'm going to go play volleyball. It's been far too long since I've played," she smirked at them. "So, I'll be at the beach. Have fun!"

Once she left, Boruk chuckled, "She's interesting."

Aang ran his hand through his hair, "Yeah, she is," he looked in the direction where Azula last was. "She's had a long, difficult journey, but she's making good progress on taking the right road."

Boruk understood, dark eyes crinkling, "Well, I hope that she succeeds, Avatar Aang." He nodded towards the scroll, "I believe that you might have success if you summoned Avatar Anil. He was the Air Avatar before Yangchen and yourself, Avatar Keska's predecessor. He may have been who unlocked true flight as the Avatar, but I don't know for certain." Boruk advised

Aang nodded, "Thank you, Avatar Boruk, for your advice and wisdom."

Boruk smiled, "Anytime, Avatar Aang," he then dispersed and rushed back into Aang's body.

Aang contemplated summoning Anil forward, but decided to make sure that Azula wasn't causing havoc at the beach; after all, if he had learned anything, it was that Azula was unpredictable.

He grabbed his headband - the very same one he had worn after Ba Sing Se - and tied it around his head. He didn't feel like announcing he was on Ember Island to everyone.

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Aang stared wide-eyed at the outfit Azula was wearing, a very male-stimulating outfit. She might as well have been wearing nothing, and he felt his body begin to respond to the arousing sight, so he subtly swirled the air around himself to calm his raging body, to hopefully make his arousal less obvious.

Once he was suitably calmed, Aang finally looked back at Azula, refusing to acknowledge the feelings rushing through his body, not even knowing why he had them. But he did acknowledge all of the lust-filled stares that she was receiving from every man on the beach. He clenched his jaw and had to seriously curb the urge to blast all the men into the ocean, not wanting to contemplate why he was so upset; he decided to blame it on the fact that she wasn't laying low. She was a war criminal, one of the most dangerous people in the entire world, and right now, she was the center of attention when she shouldn't be.

Aang heard a cry of pain and looked back towards the volleyball match. The ground was smoking from where the ball landed and one of the players was holding their foot in obvious anger, glaring at Azula. He glanced at the Princess and noticed the triumphant gleam in her eyes. He sighed, realizing that despite his words to Boruk earlier, the road to 'being good' was going take a long time to journey.

Since the game was now officially over, Aang quickly walked over to Azula. She saw him approaching and smirked up at him when he had finally arrived. "Hello, Av- Kuzon," she recovered well from her slip of the tongue, surprising him slightly that she still remembered the name that he had used when he had first entered Zuko's house.

Aang quickly pulled her by the arm away, from the crowd. "What was that?" He demanded.
Azula frowned, "What?"

"The game. That was too intense," he gestured towards the injured player who was still holding their foot. "You're supposed to be a faceless ghost in a crowd, not the star of attention."

"First of all, I toned it down, Kuzon," she gestured with her arm towards the court, "I didn't even set the net on fire this time." She smirked up at him in triumph, "And secondly, this is the first time I've been free in eight years, so I would appreciate it if you didn't expect perfection immediately."

At those words, Aang softened, remembering how Ozai had demanded perfection from his daughter, and Azula had been forced to deliver or she would be beaten. He began to breathe heavily, the very thought of Ozai's parenting methods making him angry. He wasn't angry at her, but more so at the outfit that she was wearing, her father, and all of the lustful stares that were still riveted on her. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm worried, that's all."

"Apology accepted. Now, come on, Kuzon, I'm hungry," she bumped him with her elbow and Aang felt his anger lessen almost completely. "I need some Komodo Chicken. Azula gripped his arm and directed him into town.

To fully soothe the anger warring in his mind, Aang quickly gave her his outer robe to wear, "Just wear this, okay?" And Azula smirked at him, seeming to know why he was giving it to her, but she complied without argument, gracefully slipping it on.

They walked through the market and Azula seemed to know where she was going, weaving past carts elegantly, side-stepping approaching crowds like she was an actual Airbender until they both arrived at a small stall.

Azula walked to the keeper. "One basket of Komodo Chicken," she ordered and then looked back at him, the expression on her face making him wish that she had been released from her prison years ago. "They have the best Komodo Chicken on the island at this place." She said with a smile.

"You truly honor me, my lady," the keeper beamed at them. "And would your husband like something?" He looked towards Aang.

His breathing abruptly stalled at the man's assumption and Azula must have seen his reaction for she fully turned toward him, a wicked gleam in her golden eyes. "I don't know," she reached out and placed a hand on his arm. "Husband, would you like some Komodo Chicken?"

Aang quickly recovered as best he could and shook his head, "I ate earlier. Maybe next time," he lied.

The keeper nodded in consent. "I guarantee that when you do try the Komodo Chicken, you will not regret it. Your basket will be ready shortly, my lady."

Azula raised a brow after the keeper had disappeared from sight, "'Maybe next time'?" She seemed amused.

Aang felt the need to defend himself, "Well, I've never met another vegetarian this century and I don't want to be recognized, so I felt that it would be safer and easier if I lied." He shrugged.

She smirked, "You're pretty talented at it, Kuzon," she teased. "And I must say, husband, that you recovered remarkably well."

Aang shuffled self-consciously, refraining from rolling his eyes, aware that her own eyes were staring at him. "Well, I try not to lie often, but sometimes it's unavoidable. And I've heard it from a
friend that I'm a pretty good liar, able to think extraordinarily quickly on my feet." He said almost sadly.

She must have seen the regret shining in his eyes because she stopped her teasing. "The Earthbender girl? The blind one?" She asked as they then sat down at a table. "The one who you and the peasant were with when you all confronted me during the Day of Black Sun?"

He gratefully accepted the offered distraction, "Yes, the one who you spoke to when you declared that you were a four-hundred-foot tall purple Platypus Bear with pink horns and silver wings."

Azula's lips twitched a brief laugh escaped her, "Oh, yes, she was funny, someone who wasn't afraid to threaten me."

The keeper abruptly appeared before them, interrupting. "And here is your Komodo Chicken, my lady," the man placed the chicken in front of Azula, bowed, and then left.

Azula swiftly dug into the chicken enthusiastically, moaning in pleasure as flavor must have exploded on her tongue. Aang's eyes widened at her moan, and he scratched his face trying to be subtle in his staring but wasn't sure that he succeeded. She looked up at him and noticed his strange behavior. Her eyes narrowed and then enlightenment danced in her golden orbs. "It's the meat, isn't it? I forgot that you were a vegetarian. That's what last night was about, wasn't it?"

Aang felt relieved; he could excuse his behavior from the previous night, too. He took the out that was unintentionally offered, "I'm sorry, it's just that I haven't been around people eating meat in a long time." He smiled at her, "You should see Sokka when he eats meat." His face pinched in disgust, "It takes some getting used to, I will admit."

Azula looked torn on whether to continue eating her meal, but Aang would have none of that. "Continue, continue, please. Eat your chicken, Princess Azula, I don't mind." He gestured to her plate and she smiled gratefully at him.

He was slightly ashamed to admit it, but she had a beautiful smile, not sure why he was ashamed to admit it. She was always smirking at him and while that was a nice sight, it was nothing compared to her true smile, a smile more appealing than anyone else's.

"So, was this 'Sokka' one of the peasants?" She questioned in between bites of her meal.

He closed his eyes, knowing that some things would never change. "He was the non-bender from the Water Tribe." He stressed, wishing that she would cease to call people, whoever they were, peasants. "He is the son of Hakoda, their Chief."

Azula raised a brow, "Okay, and wouldn't that make him a Prince, then?"

Aang was stumped by her question because he had honestly never thought of that. Before the Great War, when he had still been a child at the Southern Temple, he had traveled to the Fire Nation and Omashu, but those were the only places. The first time that he had ever been to one of the Poles was when Katara had found him in his Iceberg. And since he had never asked Sokka or Katara, he had no idea what the customs were for the Water Tribes, specifically, if the South used 'Prince' and 'Princess' like the North did.

She noted his blank expression, "So, the Northern Water Tribe uses traditional titles while the Southern does not." She surmised, taking another bite of her chicken.

He was slightly surprised at her knowledge of the Water Tribe traditions but knew that he shouldn't be, he needed to cease to feel surprised by how smart and intelligent she was. "Yes, it seems that way, apparently," he thought of Yue and sighed, "The Northern Water Tribe's Princess
sacrificed her life to save the Moon Spirit." He looked up at the bright sky where he knew Yue was, even though she wasn't visible.

Azula observed his somber mood. "The day when the moon vanished from the sky," she concluded.

Aang looked back at Azula, "Her name is Yue," he smiled sadly. "I could have saved her, you know? It was my fault when she died because I didn't take my waterbending training seriously under Pakku. I could have snuffed out the threat before it had even begun, but because of my naivety and immaturity, I didn't." He whispered in self-loathing, thinking of all of the people who had perished because of his inaction and mistakes.

"Well, she was very brave, Kuzon. It takes a true and noble Princess, a fierce warrior, to stare death in the face and not flinch." Azula complimented.

He smiled genuinely, thankful for her praise of a person who he had failed to save. "She was very brave, one of the bravest who I've encountered since my awakening."

She then took another bit of chicken, almost finished with her meal. "So, since this Princess Yue was the heir to the Northern Water Tribe and she is gone, does that mean your friend, Sokka will control all of the Water Tribes?" She questioned.

Aang's eyebrows rose in realization, "Yeah, I guess that you're right," he nodded his head. "I do know that Sokka was named the heir of the Northern Water Tribe after the Great War, the next-in-line to become their Chief, but I don't know if he will still become Chief of the South, thus controlling the entire Water Tribes. That's an excellent question, Azula, I'll need to ask Sokka when I see him next, if I ever do." He finished darkly, still bitter about his friend's abandonment, about the entire Gaang's save Zuko.

"What?" She asked in bemusement, leaning forward. "Was there... a falling out between your crew of misfits?" She looked incredibly interested in his answer and Aang felt uncomfortable. He noticed that she had finally finished her Komodo Chicken, so he left a few coins on the table and stood up.

"I'm not sure yet," he murmured, silently begging her not to press the issue.

She did seem to drop it, for she looked at the coins and then up at him, standing to her feet. "You're paying for my meal, and since the keeper concluded that we are married, are we then on a date?" Her golden eyes gleamed under Agni's light with mirth.

Aang laughed, grateful that she hadn't compelled him to speak about the Gaang. "Come on, Princess, let's go," they walked back to the beach and found a secluded part, making themselves comfortable on the sand, reclining back as they watched the newest game of volleyball that was being played.

"You were very good," he said eventually, still watching the game.

"Oh, do you think so?" She questioned lightly, "I think that I might have lost a few steps. It was fun, though, and as my uncle always used to say, isn't that what counts? I do wish, though, that I had set the net on fire again." She sighed in regret and Aang shook his head in amusement. "You know that you would be very good at it, don't you?" She was staring at him.

Aang finally looked at her. "What makes you say that?" He questioned, incredulous at where she had concluded such a belief.

"Well, you are an Airbender, so that means that you possess impossible, uncanny agility and
reflexes. Secondly," she quickly looked around, "you are the Avatar. I'm sure that you've played volleyball in a past life, so all that you have to do is just use the Avatar State and then you would be good to go." She looked triumphantly at him.

Aang suddenly envisioned a mirage of Kyoshi and Roku playing volleyball, and laughed heartily, "I think that that would be a big exploitation of my power, Princess."

She shrugged, "Well, maybe you don't have to use the Avatar State. You would still be incredible at the game, though. Remember what I said about airbending?"

He slowly turned his body towards her, gauging how serious she was being. He didn't feel surprised when he discovered that she was completely serious.

Aang suddenly jumped to his feet in a blurred motion and held out his hand to her. "Well, come on then, Princess. Let's show Ember Island how to really play volleyball." He grinned.

Azula blinked and took his hand with a smirk, "Let's do it."

Aang hadn't had this much fun in years. It was just he and Azula on one side against four opponents who didn't stand a chance, in all honesty. It was unfair, actually. The game was over within minutes and if Aang had used airbending to make the ball go faster, no one had had to know. They had played several games and won by a large margin each and every time.

The sun was beginning to set, so they decided to call it quits, the relieved looks on the opponents' faces easy to see as they announced that they were finished. Together, they walked back to the house and Aang contemplated the past several days. He hadn't expected this situation when he first decided to visit Ember Island, not at all, but, shockingly, he was content with how things had turned out.

Once they stumbled inside, Azula turned to look at him, "I can't remember the last time when I had so much… fun, so I truly thank you, Avatar."

He shook his head, "It's Aang, okay?" At his words, Azula looked confused so he clarified. "It wasn't the Avatar who you had fun with today. That was all Aang, it was just… me." He smiled slightly. "The Avatar is my title, my position, just like yours is Princess."

Azula nodded in understanding, "Okay, so, thank you… Aang." The sounded foreign on her tongue but Aang liked the sound of it. "I agree on one condition, though."

"And what's that?"

"You cease to refer to me by my title, understand?" Her eyes were serious, "I want you to just call me Azula, please."

He smiled and nodded his head, "Very well, Azula."

When they had finally begun to eat dinner, Azula abruptly asked him the question that he had been dreading, surprised that it had taken her so long, honestly. "What happened to your group?"

Aang sipped his drink and contemplated how to answer. "We grew up, I guess. After the Great War, I stayed in the Fire Nation for over year to help your brother fortify his ascension, and Toph, to my knowledge, after leaving the Caldera, had stayed with her parents for several-

"The Earthbender?"
He nodded, "Yes, the Earthbender. Anyway, she stayed for a few weeks with me in the Caldera, helping your brother, but then she left to go back to her home. She had wanted to try and reconcile with her parents. Katara and Sokka had left almost immediately to go back to the Southern Water Tribe. I'm guessing that they missed their home and their family. Sokka will be the next Chief of the Tribe, maybe even of both the Tribes, and Katara also went to go help with the rebuilding process. And then where Sokka goes, Suki follows," he concluded.

Azula stared at him, tilting her head to the side, "You're angry with them," she observed.

Aang stared at her flabbergasted, "No, I'm not,"

"Yes, you are. I can see it in your eyes and the bitter tone you just used when describing what had happened more than speaks for itself."

He chuckled in disbelief and shook his head adamantly, "That's not true, Azula. They're my friends," he said almost darkly, knowing that she was right, but not wanting to open the door to all of his stuffed feelings and emotions.

"Just because you are friends with someone doesn't mean that you cannot feel angry and betrayed by them."

Aang stood up and glared at her, "I do not feel betrayed by them." He snapped quietly, on the brink of an eruption, gray eyes daring and begging.

"Yes, you do," she said simply, looking unimpressed by his scowl. "It's quite plain to see and easy to understand. After you had learned of the genocide of the Air Nation, your group had become your new family, they were the rock that kept you from descending deep into your unimaginable grief." Her golden eyes were sympathetic, understanding, and it made him even angrier.

"You don't know that, you don't." He shook his head, "You're wrong, Azula,"

She didn't react, only continuing to stare up at him, "Often, the biggest and easiest lies we ever tell are the ones we whisper to ourselves. You told me earlier that you hadn't spoken with another human face-to-face in years, except, I'm assuming, for your past lives. You mentioned messages and I already know that my brother is one of those select few people who have the honor of writing the Avatar, but the rest of your group haven't written, have they? Otherwise, you wouldn't be so furious with them." She leaned forward, golden eyes alight with the truth. "You've been also telling yourself that you aren't angry with them, that they're your friends, and that they would never abandon you, right? But the more time that passes, the less control you possess over the fact that your friends left you like marketplace trash."

Aang stared at her with wide eyes, blood drained from his features. Azula had just effortlessly torn through all of the lies that he had told himself over the years so that he wouldn't feel angry with his friends. His fists clenched tightly, so tightly that he was concerned that his knuckles would burst through his skin, and he dimly noticed that the water in their cups began to swirl violently, the house began to shake, the candles explode into massive and roaring infernos of flames, and that the air around them began to howl around the room. He was too busy scowling down at Azula.

"So, what do you care? Yes, I'm incensed with them. They abandoned me! I needed them, and what did they do? They left! I've barely been keeping it together since the Great War ended!" He was breathing heavily and felt exhausted all of the sudden.

Azula had a soft expression on her face. "I know what you mean, how you feel," her words were barely audible, but he easily heard them.

Aang's head snapped towards her in disbelief and rage, "No, you don't! You know nothing,
Azula. I lost my race, home, people, family, friends and then I lost my new family once the Great War, the war which stole my first family away from me, had ended." His eyes and tattoos glowed a blinding light as his rage exploded, Ember Island itself shaking, his wrath was so fierce. "I've lost everything!" Once the booming words escaped his lips in a rush of deafening thunder, the Avatar State left, and the only feeling in his heart was a sense of loss.

Azula tilted her head to the side, recovering remarkably quick for someone who had just stared face-to-face with the fury of the Avatar State. "Maybe I don't know on the same level, Aang, but I do know how you feel, to feel betrayed." She held up her hand to cut him off from speaking, "Mai and Ty Lee chose Zuko over me," she said quietly and Aang paused, realization flooding his mind. Zuko had told them all at the Western Air Temple about what had happened at the Boiling Rock, how Mai and Ty Lee had betrayed Azula, opting instead to buy Sokka, Zuko, Suki, Hakoda, and Chit Sang time to escape. He had never thought much about how that could have affected Azula, but now he realized the significance of the event. His anger at her dissipated and he quickly sat down next to her solemn form. She was staring at her meal with unseeing eyes, "That's what pushed me over the edge, you know? It was the beginning of the end for me. First, mother left, Zuko was banished, and then I was stuck with Ozai for years by myself." Her hands clenched, "Then, Mai and Ty Lee chose Zuko over me at the Boiling Rock." Azula looked into his eyes, "While it is nowhere near the same level of betrayal and loss that you have suffered, I understand better than anyone ever will what it is that you are feeling."

He softened and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for sharing, and I'm sorry that I took my anger out on you." He said sincerely and guiltily, and without thinking it through, he hugged her. She stiffened and Aang was afraid that he had made a terrible and unforgivable mistake but was instead met with Azula hugging him back, gently wrapping her arms around him, head resting against his shoulder. They stayed there for several minutes basking in the feel of someone who simply understood their deep pain and sorrow.

"Would you like to spar?" Aang questioned abruptly.

Azula smirked across at him, "Whatever you desire, Avatar," then, without warning, she punched a wave of sapphire flames at him and Aang retaliated with his own wave of flames.

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It had been far too long since he had sparred with somebody and the evidence was more than apparent. Aang was sweating heavily and Azula was doing little better. Both of them had become exhausted from their spar and, together, had decided that a cup of tea would be nice after such an intense and grueling workout.

"I went easy on you," he quipped. "I only used fire, you know?"

Azula raised a brow at him over her cup, "And how did that work out for you, Avatar?" She questioned innocently, taking a sip of her tea.
Aang looked down at his seared clothes and sighed, "Not too well, Azula,"

They drank their tea in silence for a few moments when Azula asked, "Perchance, do you know whatever happened to Mai and Ty Lee?" She had tried to infuse an air of indifference in her tone, but she failed, especially since Aang could see the burning need to know in her golden eyes.

"Last I heard, Azula, was that they were in the Colonies in the Earth Kingdom after escaping from punishment," he said regretfully, wishing that he could tell her more, but at the same time, he was glad that he didn't know anything more to their whereabouts or health. If he did, Azula might sneak off Ember Island, track them down, and kill them.

Azula's face pinched in displeasure as she sipped from her cup of tea and looked at the Agni's fading light. "You know, a small part of me actually misses them," the disbelief in her tone was evident and understandable. "Even after they had blatantly betrayed me, I… miss them," she said softly.

Aang smiled gently, "And that's okay, it truly is. I feel that way about my friends, too. While my anger is not like yours, I'd still like to smack them around a little bit." He grinned mischievously, "Maybe flash the Avatar State at them, or something."

She laughed, "That would be quite the sight," she quieted and stared into his eyes, "but a much bigger part of me wants to shoot them with lightning." She said sharply as if she was testing him.

He shrugged, realizing that she was, indeed, testing him, but he was going to be honest regardless. "And that's okay, as well. No one is perfect, Azula, not even me, the almighty Avatar. After all, I've felt the urge to…" he paused and clenched his jaw. He was about to admit his darkest secret to the woman who had hunted him across the world, but the realization didn't scare him; he realized that it would be all right. "I've felt the urge to kill, Azula."

She was staring at him with no disgust or judgment. Rather, she seemed almost sympathetic, even curious. "Truly? But you didn't kill my father."

"And do you know how much a part of me wanted to? And if I hadn't summoned the Lion Turtle forward, learning how to take his bending away, I would have killed him, Azula, I really would have. I already have blood on my hands, so much blood, they're blood-drenched."

She leaned forward, "When have you killed?"

He raised an eyebrow and wondered briefly if she was still testing him, trying to determine if he would be honest with her, "Tens of thousands of people have died directly by hands. I decimated the Fire Navy at the Northern Water Tribe, killing who knows how many men and women. And the destruction of an entire Earth Kingdom base is on my head because my rage was so great. I was in the Avatar State both times and I had no control, but at the same time, I knew exactly what I was doing and how many people were dying; I knew that I was killing people and I hadn't cared."

He now saw the truth in Roku's words and he echoed them, "I am capable of unimaginable rage and every time that I've become furious, people die. When gods fight or become angry, it is the mortals who die, never the gods."

He closed his eyes, inhaling slowly. It was an irrefutable truth that he had been denying for far too long, refusing to admit to. He did have blood on his hands, so much blood because of his direct actions, probably more than Fire Lord Ozai's. The falsehoods that he had told himself were only a temporary solution to his problem, not a permanent one like he had forced himself to believe. It was time for him to finally admit the truth, and there was nothing that he could truly do about the amount of blood on his hands. The past was in the past, and it needed to stay there. He exhaled
deeply and… let his guilt go, feeling freer than he had in years – and lighter, too.

Azula was staring at him in awe, "What did you do? How did you do that?" She breathed.

Aang raised his brow for he hadn't aware that she would know what he was doing, that she would realize that he was, in essence, forgiving himself for all of the blood soaking his hands. "I let go of my guilt," he said simply. "I was in the middle of the Great War, at the climax, and if I hadn't done those terrible deeds, the world would be on the brink of collapse and I would have failed in my duty as the Avatar."

Azula still stared and looked like she was about to ask something, but she then changed her mind. "Well, it's late and I'm exhausted from our spar, so good night, Avatar." She stood up and winced, apology carved into her face. "Good night, Aang," she corrected, nodding her head.

He smiled and then chuckled, "Good night, Azula," he nodded his head back at her, watching as she left the room. They were making good progress and she was on her way to redeeming herself of her past sins.

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They are making progress! This was fun to write. I hope you all enjoyed it! Leave a comment and tell me what you think!

**Aang and Azula are slowly getting used to each other, and it helps that they both deal with similar tragedies in their lives. If you believe either character seems to be out of character, then I disagree. Both are simply progressing along the natural character growth – or, in Azula's case, withering – that they had in Canon. Both of them are now adults and both have dealt with a lot since the Great War ended. They are both now helping each other heal from the scars that they've suffered, and it truly helps that they seem to understand each other more than anyone else.

And you'll find out what happened to the Gaang soon, don't worry. There's a reason why Aang is furious with them.

Anyway, I hope that you enjoyed it. If you leave a comment, I'd really appreciate it.

Stay safe
ButtonPusher
Bursting through his privy chamber, his mother's face was pale, blood drained from her features so much so that she resembled that of a corpse. Her eyes were bulging from their sockets, breaths quick and urgent, and her face was a mass of shrilled terror. While he was incredibly concerned about what had caused such a reaction in her, he was still surprised that she had even approached him, nonetheless appearing in his own privy chamber, for his mother hadn't spoken to him at all in the weeks since he had notified her of how he had let Azula escape from her room. Just as he had known that she would be, she had been furious, livid, cursing him bitterly as he had, in her words, 'taken her daughter away from her'.

When she didn't say anything about what had caused such a reaction, he had a terrible feeling and knew that something was wrong, potentially catastrophic. "What happened? What is it? Is it Ember Island? Did Azula… attack anyone?" He demanded, thinking the worst. If his sister had, indeed, attacked someone, there would be no way that he could protect her again; he would be forced to hand her over to the Earth Kingdom, having no other choice.

His mother wet her lips and he noticed that she was on the verge of tears, cementing Zuko's belief that Azula had wasted the chance for a new life that he had worked so hard to give her. "No, darling, no," she whispered. "There have been no reports from Ember Island except that one night, a few weeks ago, the entire island had trembled and shuddered for several seconds. The locals had thought that the volcano had finally awakened after its centuries sleep, but I think not. And it wasn't Azula for no human could possess such power as to quaver Ember Island, the second largest island in the Fire Nation behind the main one."

"Then why do you look like you were just haunted by Azulon's ghost?" He demanded, wanting to know who had her so spooked so that he could order that person's execution. People in the past have been executed for less.

His mother's eyes closed, and she collapsed in the chair next to her, Zuko leaping to his feet at the horrible sight. His mother, though, was still conscious, "Your father escaped from his prison, my beautiful boy," she breathed out, hands shaking by her sides.

Zuko blinked because, surely, he had misheard his mother. He had implemented every measure possible to ensure his father's security, guaranteeing that none of the guards held any loyalty to their former Fire Lord. And all of the guards were routinely changed, making sure that his father couldn't begin to manipulate them into freeing him. He hadn't taken any chances where it concerned Ozai's prison, so how could his father have escaped? Ozai could not even bend anymore. Aang had assured him!

Help.

His father had had help, and it was the only possibility. His anger was mounting, and his fists clenched, smoke beginning to drift through the slits, the thought of one of his citizens betraying him for his father spreading a sickening fury in his heart. He stood up and walked quickly to his mother. "I'll take care of it, I promise,"

She gripped his arms desperately and it was the first time in his memory that he had ever seen her frightened. "How could this have happened?"
Zuko pulled her to her feet and into a fierce hug. "That's what I'm going to try and decipher." He tried to smile down at her, but he felt that it was more of a grimace based on his mother's expression, "I want you to be in your rooms alone. No one goes in or out except you, do you understand?"

Ursa nodded, "Just please be careful," her eyes were on the verge of hysteria.

Zuko nodded back, "I will be," he assured. "I'm going to assure that no harm befalls me, you, uncle, or Azula, all right? By the time I get my hands on him, he will begin to wish that the Avatar had killed him."

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Ozai's cell showed no signs of tampering, none at all, looking completely normal. All of the bars were perfectly spaced, allowing no one to slip through, least of all a grown man. He gripped the steel bars and pulled with all his strength, slightly surprised that it wouldn't budge at all.

Nothing.

Zuko pursed his lips, "Guards!" He called out, whirling around in a wave of fury as the five guards stumbled into the room and kneeled before him. He glared down at them, judging their actions, "You will all tell me exactly what happened, and your stories better correlate with each other's, or your heads will be cleaved from your shoulders, do you understand me?" None of the guards spoke up for a few moments, terrified faces glancing at one another, making them look guilty, implicating them in his father's escape. Zuko grit his teeth and stomped past them, judgment already cemented - they were guilty. "I pray for your sakes that Agni is more merciful than I am. Tomorrow, your deaths will take place," he growled out.

The bravest guard then finally spoke, "No, my liege, please! None of us helped the prisoner escape from his cell, for we were there when it happened!"

He paused and slowly turned around, "What do you mean? Tell me!"

"Everything was normal, my liege. There was no suspicious activity. After Agni had begun to fade, that is when we heard the prisoner begin to speak. After several minutes of indecipherable chatter, I unlocked the door to make sure there was no one else in the room, and just as I had suspected, the room was empty except for the prisoner." The guard finally looked up and the fear etched into his features revealed to Zuko that none of the guards had helped his father escape. "Fire Lord Zuko, the prisoner's eyes were glazed over, and he was speaking lowly."

"What was he saying?"

The guard swallowed, "The prisoner kept saying, 'Light is now falling, and Darkness will rise to vanquish it. The Avatar will feel death intimately, and by my hands, that boy will cease to exist forever, no more Avatar Cycle.'" Zuko's eyes widened and dread curdled in his stomach, "My liege, he kept repeating those words over and over, like they were a mantra, like a ticket to the peaceful and tranquil parts of the Gardens of the Dead."

His hands clasped behind his back to force himself to keep his anger at bay, "And what did you do after hearing those words?"

I quickly shut the door," the guard then gestured to the rest of his silent companions. "We had all thought that the prisoner had finally lost his marbles." The guard trailed off, body shaking in fear.

Zuko frowned, "Very well, but what happened after you returned to your position? How did my
A different guard spoke when the other was too stricken by fear, "Then, all of a sudden, Fire Lord Zuko, stifling darkness descended into the room and cell. It was so terribly cold, my liege, like we were drowning in the waters of the Poles." The guard's hands rubbed together, "And then, the prisoner began to shout in glee, ecstasy echoing throughout the room and into our ears. We couldn't see anything, my liege, and when we tried to firebend, our Fire ceased to burn. The frigid cold and darkness had... blanketed it, swallowing it whole." All of the guards shuddered in unison, "It was the most terrifying and horrifying experience in my life, Fire Lord, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy."

"And what happened after?"

"When the darkness disappeared," he gestured again to his companions, "we all felt our Fire surge back to life, spreading through our bodies in a brilliant warmth."

Zuko hissed when the guard trailed off, "And?"

Another guard spoke, "We fell into firebending stances, my liege, and approached the door." The guard refused to look up, head kept bowed. "It was me who opened the door and looked into the cell, and the prisoner was gone, my liege. I'm sorry that we failed you, Fire Lord Zuko, all of us are!"

"That's it? There's nothing else that you can tell me?"

"We have no idea what happened, my liege. This was a spirit, it had to have been! It was malevolent and strong."

"That's all you can recall? Just that the dark presence was evil and strong?" He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

One of the other guards lifted his head, tears visible in his eyes. "No, my liege, that dark presence wasn't just strong. It was powerful, so terrifyingly powerful. I didn't believe it possible for anyone, man or spirit, to possess such power, but now I know that I was wrong. Can even the Avatar defeat this dark presence, Fire Lord Zuko?" The words were asked with such desperation that Zuko felt trepidation begin to thrive in his mind, like a flame on the edge of his consciousness, growing with each passing second.

Zuko elected not to answer the guard's question and instead, stared down at all of the kneeling guards critically, "Is this true?" He demanded, scrutinizing their forms, looking for any signs of deceit. He wished that Azula was here. No one was versed in the art of deception like she was.

All the guards nodded, "Yes, my liege," they all said in unison.

"Dismissed," he said tiredly, watching as all of the guards scurried out and Zuko rubbed his forehead in displeasure. If what they had said was, indeed, true, then this was a spirit's work. He stared at the cell for several seconds and then turned around, swiftly making his way back to his privy chamber.

As he marched back to his room, he realized that this was entirely beyond his expertise, and there was only one person in the entire world who could possibly solve it. Zuko needed his friend here, he needed the Avatar. Once he arrived back to his privy chamber, he pulled out a scroll and hastily wrote his friend the details of what had happened. Once finished, he stamped the Royal Seal on the parchment and ordered one of the imperial firebending guards to send it off immediately to the Southern Air Temple.
Zuko sighed and laid his head on his desk. Just when things had begun to look up, especially since the Earth Kingdom hadn't declared war when Azula had 'escaped' from her cell, his father somehow truly escaped from his prison. He scrunched his one eyebrow and lifted his head, coming to the conclusion that he needed to message his uncle, and not just because he missed the man terribly. Although they exchanged messages regularly, messages just weren't the same as a real conversation - face-to-face. He had decided to write to his uncle for two reasons: firstly, his uncle's rumored trip to the Spirit World had reached his ears, so Zuko truly hoped that it was true and that his uncle might know more about this dark and powerful presence, and secondly, he wrote him for selfish reasons; Zuko wanted his uncle here in the Fire Nation with him, with his family, and not at the fucking tea shop, the Jasmine Dragon.

He sighed again, knowing that he was truly selfish, but he didn't really care. He was past caring, he truly was. He had been so lonely for so long, and he didn't think it a crime to yearn for a better life. He was tempted to order a concubine be brought to his chambers but narrowly refrained from the urge. Instead, he focused on his anger at his friends. The Gaang hadn't been all together in the same room since the Great War had ended. No letters had ever been written and it hurt so much to think that he had only been a useful tool in their eyes: a firebending teacher for Aang and the heir to the Dragon's Throne so that they wouldn't have to worry about a repeat of the Cousins' War as suitors all across the Fire Nation vied for the Dragon's Throne; he didn't know why so many people envied that he sat on the Dragon's Throne, for it wasn't even that comfortable.

Aang was the only person out of anyone in the Gaang who had kept in touch with him, regularly exchanging messages, but that was it. He hadn't actually seen his friend in years. The only people who he had seen on a constant basis were Azula and his mother, and his mother had been his only constant companion since he had found her. Should he message the Gaang, too? Would they be equipped to deal with a spiritual threat? He thought of Sokka and Toph and quickly thought better of the idea to write the rest of them.

He shook his head, hoping that Aang received his message and would arrive at the Caldera quickly because the sooner that he can solve this problem and put his father back in prison, the sooner when he could have a proper rest.

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After so much anxiety, it was a miracle that Zuko had not begun to pull his hair out. It had been several weeks since when he had written Aang, and from what he had discovered after he had already sent the message, the Avatar hadn't been seen by the public in a few months. At first, when he hadn't received a reply, he hadn't been worried. Zuko had known that his friend resided at the Southern Air Temple and once a month, Aang would travel to one of the smaller towns in the Earth Kingdom, flying over on Appa's back to reassure the world that he hadn't disappeared again.

So, when he had received no response after a week, he had figured that Aang was doing his tour in the Earth Kingdom, keeping balance as he was supposed to. Then, a single week had quickly turned into multiple weeks and still, no word had been received from his friend.

He had written letters to each of the Air Temples and no response had been given by his friend. At the Northern Temple, the Mechanic had expressed regret that the Avatar was not there, and that's when he became truly worried. He feared that this 'dark' presence had somehow killed his friend, but when he had questioned the Fire Sages about such an event, they had assured him that when an Avatar died, anyone who could feel the slightest Spirit World energy would feel his or her passing. That was the only assurance he had that his friend wasn't dead.

But it had been too long, almost two months, and nothing had come of it, and Ozai wasn't found. Zuko's father had disappeared out of the Fire Nation and was most likely hiding somewhere in the
Earth Kingdom, but that was only a guess. His only reprieve had been his mother and uncle; a few days after sending his message to his uncle, the man had shown up at the Caldera carrying a box of tea and a bottle of firewhiskey. Zuko had been immensely grateful and also a little guilty. He had taken his uncle away from the Jasmine Dragon, even though it hadn't pained him to do so.

"You should sit down, my son," his mother suddenly said, cutting through his thoughts.

Zuko paced back and forth while his uncle was calmly sipping his tea, his mother sitting next to the Dragon of the West, her brother-in-law; when his uncle had first seen his mother upon his arrival, he had yanked her into a fierce hug, consoling her gently. And that was when Zuko had known that his uncle understood exactly how Fire Lord Azulon died and why Zuko's mother had disappeared.

"Your mother is right, nephew, perhaps it would be best if you wrote your friends, hmm?" His uncle suggested, peering up at him over his cup.

He sighed and begrudgingly sat down across from him, "I don't want to interrupt their lives with my problems, uncle,"

An eyebrow was raised as his uncle shook his head, "I'm sure that if you asked, they would come without hesitation, Zuko. When was the last time you spoke with any of them?"

Wincing inwardly, but outwardly showing no expression, he answered coolly. "Last I heard, uncle, Toph was in Omashu with King Bumi. Katara, Sokka, and Suki are all currently at the South Pole, and as you know, I don't even know where Aang is." He deflected.

His uncle put down his cup of tea, golden eyes intrigued, "You didn't answer my question, nephew,"

Zuko stayed silent for a few moments, wondering if he could subtly deflect again, but he doubted it. At times, he forgot that his uncle was a General, but looking at him now, he remembered. "I haven't spoken with any of them in a few years except Aang," he admitted softly, staring at the grass.

"Zuko, you should not push others away," his uncle chided, looking at his mother for help. Those words ignited his fierce ire and that's when Zuko lost it. "But everyone always leaves! They had left just a few days after the Great War ended. It was like, 'Hey, thanks for not betraying us like we all thought you would, Zuko, but now that you helped Aang with firebending, you're no longer useful to us. See ya!' Aang was my only companion for a year, and then he had to leave because the Avatar had been needed elsewhere. Mother left for years and it was me who had to find her because your father, uncle, had decreed that she could never return home otherwise. Now, Azula is gone and you left me in favor of a fucking tea shop!" His breaths were ragged, and he yearned to spew out his full rage like a Dragon but seeing how the candles in the room already resembled more of an inferno than a simple flame, he elected not to.

He saw his uncle open his mouth and then close it, speechlessness all that Zuko was given in response as his uncle just stared at him, realization making its way into his face with each passing second.

The realization that his uncle was shocked, or worse, hadn't even known that Zuko was bitter that the Jasmine Dragon was more important to him than he was, was too much and he had to get out of there. He stormed out of the room, ignoring his mother's requests to say, and slammed the door shut. He quickly stomped towards the Arena, servants fleeing at the very sight of his approaching form.
The imperial firebending guards nodded at him respectfully as he arrived at the entrance to the Arena, and when he looked at them, he ordered that they allow no one to enter. With his command spoken, he retreated into the Arena.

He was all alone.

Tearing off his robe and inner garbs, he threw them to the ground, uncaring if anyone somehow snuck past the guards and was able to gaze at the myriad of scars on his back and chest – he was too angry. After dropping his crown on top of his pile of clothes, he began to aggressively and violently shoot fire in every direction, no grace to his movements, only an animalistic intensity that, he dimly noted, would make his father proud.

He didn't know how long he continued his katas but by the time when he had concluded the fiery need to unleash his fury, flames were swelling in the room, the atmosphere becoming a reddish hue. It resembled the Fire Royal Catacombs to a far lesser degree. As his breathing slowly began to ease, Zuko sighed and waved his hand in a broad motion, commanding the fire to extinguish, which it did, and he plopped himself on the floor by his clothes and crown.

He stared at the ground and contemplated his situation, knowing that, by now, he should probably write the Gaang, but he didn't want to do that, not even a little bit. He was angry with them, and he knew that he wasn't the only one who was left with sour emotions concerning their old group. By the time when Aang had left the Fire Nation, it was pretty obvious, at least to Zuko, that his best friend was more than a little vexed with them - he almost felt bad for the others, almost.

He was also almost certain that his anger at the Gaang was insignificant next to Aang's. And if he felt as angry as he did, he did not want to be anywhere near the Gaang when Aang finally decided to confront them; it would be explosive and terrifying.

Zuko still didn't want to contact them, but what other choice did he have, though?

Aang had disappeared and he didn't know who else he could turn to for help. Azula would be a viable option, but that would be especially risky because the Earth Kingdom wanted her head on a pike. If anything, he knew that he could trust her to help him put Ozai back in prison, or even kill him if necessary. It had taken a long time, but he had finally been able to coax her to open up about their father, and it had been such a relief to know that he wasn't the only one who hated him, that she did, too. He also was aware that she could have been lying to him, trying to manipulate him, but he doubted it because the hate that had danced in her eyes like flames was extremely hard to fake, if it could even be faked at all, in Zuko's experiences.

But, in spite of their shared loathing for their father, he didn't trust her, though. He had often heard his uncle say that if you want to know the future, look to the past because it, and it alone, is the best prophet. And when Zuko gazed into the past, the lightning scar on his chest ached, reminding him painfully. He supposed that if he became truly desperate, and if Aang continued to not be seen across the Earth Kingdom and at the Air Temples, he would write to Ember Island, describing the situation to Azula as bluntly and honestly as he could because, other than Aang, she would be the best person to help him get to the bottom of this mess and capture Ozai again.

Zuko sighed tiredly but then his body tensed as he felt a presence behind him. Whirling around as he shifted into a firebending stance, he growled in annoyance and snuffed out his flames at the sight of his visitor.

"Go away, uncle," he ordered, not even trying to decipher how the old man had snuck in past the imperial firebending guards, but knowing his uncle, he had probably charmed them into letting him in.
He felt his uncle sit next to him, sighing heavily. "I cannot do that, nephew, you should know that by now."

"It didn't stop you before, you know?" He hissed, "You had no qualms with going away to your fucking tea shop."

"Yes, I made a mistake, a terrible mistake, didn't I?" His uncle hummed lowly and clasped his hands together, "But, this time, nephew, I am not leaving. I'll sit here for days if I must."

Zuko finally looked at him, glaring at him with all of his fury. "Then you are as much a fool as you've always been! It is treason to go against the Fire Lord's word - I could easily order your execution." He growled out, spitting out the words like venom.

A mere eyebrow was raised calmly, "And will you order my death?"

After a moment, he huffed and deflated, "No, of course, not," he muttered, feeling almost like that petulant teenager he had when he was first banished, but throughout it all, his uncle had never left his side, just as the old man refused to leave him now, but this time, he wanted him gone.

A small smile graced his uncle's features, "I know that you wouldn't, nephew. After all, I am your favorite uncle." Zuko rolled his eyes but didn't say anything, turning away from him. He heard his uncle sigh quietly in regret. "You are right, nephew mine," he said softly. "I had found it far too easy to claim permanent residence in Ba Sing Se, thought of only as a humble man who loved tea throughout the entire city. Not even Kuei knew my identity, and he still doesn't!"

"What's your point?"

"Zuko, the Jasmine Dragon, ever since Lu Ten died, had been one of my dreams, you see? I had yearned for a simple existence for so long- "

"What a stupid fucking dream," he barked.

"- and when I was given the opportunity, I had turned my back on my other great dream, a far more important dream. Do you what dream I speak of?"

He wished his uncle would be willing to speak candidly, but he knew that was a ridiculous notion. "What was the dream, uncle?"

"You," Zuko looked at the man, studying his uncle's weary and drawn features, the hunched-over shoulders. The golden eyes that looked back at him were old, and with a start, he realized that his uncle, the Dragon of the West, looked much older than his mere sixty years of age. In fact, at this moment, his uncle resembled the portraits of Fire Lord Sozin when Zuko's great-grandfather had been nearing his death.

"How was... I a dream?"

His uncle closed his eyes and shame was carved into his face, "You've been several of them, nephew. At first, when Ozai usurped the Dragon's Throne and your mother killed my father, my wish, my greatest aspiration, was that you would redeem our line, Sozin's line, becoming a redeemer of the past just like Sozin's father had been. I had hoped for you to become a Fire Lord who the rest of the nations respected, instead of fearing and hating you just as they did my brother, my father, and eventually, my grandfather. I wanted your life as a ruler to be one of peace instead of misery and loneliness as my grandfather's and my father's became. Personally, I am of the belief that Sozin died more from the loneliness that he felt instead of old age." His uncle's golden eyes opened, and he stared at Zuko intently, honestly. "But then, after I returned from my grieving over Lu Ten's death, and had gotten closer with you, I realized that I never wanted this life for you, you
know, to become the Fire Lord. I didn't want it for you, especially after your banishment."

"What?"

"I was selfish, Zuko, so dreadfully selfish. I began to want you to become like me, a man who wanted nothing of the honor or glory of sitting on the Dragon's Throne. I wanted my name to be forgotten by the Children of Fire and even the Fire Royal Family, and I wanted you to be forgotten, too." Zuko felt his rage rekindle at his uncle's words but let him continue, barely.

"When the Jasmine Dragon became successful during the twilight of the Great War, before Azula had entered the city, I was the most happy, nephew, happier than any time in my life. And eventually, you seemed happy, too, and I had begun to fantasize a life where we both settled down, working at a tea shop for the rest of our days. I had turned my back on the winds of fate, of their decree for you to become Fire Lord, and after Ba Sing Se fell, I had realized that it was the time when I fully enter the rebellion's effort against my brother. And when you betrayed me, I had known that only you could force yourself to see the truth, to become the man who I always knew you would become." Zuko's eyes closed at the reminder of those dreadful times, of one of his worst memories: the sight of his uncle shunning him, shame and disappointment carved into his chiseled features.

"I'm sorry for what I did," he whispered, the memories bombarding him.

His uncle's hand grasped his own, "I already forgave you a long time ago for your actions under the great city of Ba Sing Se, Zuko. So, when we were finally reunited before Sozin's Comet, I had been stricken for days beforehand that I would never see you again, but by the spirits' grace, we met once more. You were the brave, little soldier boy who came marching home." A single tear slid down his uncle's cheek and Zuko felt emotions well within him at the words. And after several moments, his uncle continued, "But, once the Great War ended, that fantasy gripped me again and wouldn't let go, and while I knew that you could never be a part of it, I still wanted it."

"So, you just left because of a… fantasy?" He asked in anger and disbelief, wondering how his uncle, the wisest man he had ever met, could have been so irrational.

His uncle nodded, continuing, "Yes, I did leave you, abandoning you to run a nation that the rest of the world over hated while I was, as you put it, content with a stupid fucking dream. I was too focused on my fantasy for the Jasmine Dragon, my own personal tea shop, Zuko, I was too selfish. I wanted a life of obscurity and peace away from the Fire Nation where so many memories lurked, and I never even thought of how my decisions would ever affect you." His uncle gazed at him with tear-filled eyes, misery etched into his features. "And for that, nephew, I am so sorry,"

In spite of his anger, he felt tears well in his good eye, draining away his rage, leaving him ready to forgive his uncle. Although he really wanted to be angry at him, scorning and shunning him, he couldn't do it. He loved his uncle too much, and he realized that he would only be acting petty if he held onto his fury; he was no longer that banished teenager. "I'm sorry for calling your dream stupid," he whispered and yanked the old man into a hug, both men letting their tears finally fall.

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After their reconciliation, the two heirs to Sozin had visited the Fire Lord's privy chamber, drinking tea while discussing potential solutions to Ozai's escape.

"Have you had any contact with Mai and Ty Lee since you had to banish them." His uncle asked as he sipped from his cup of tea.

Zuko shook his head tiredly, raggedly exhaling. "The last I heard from either of them was when they had been in the Earth Kingdom a few years ago, somewhere in the Colonies."
"And what about your sister?"

He shook his head, but his conflict was clear in his mind. He honestly didn't know, and he told his uncle as much, "I don't know, I truly don't. If I need to, I will write to her, but I don't believe that the situation is dire enough to bring her in yet."

"Azula would be a great asset," his uncle said pointedly, golden eyes remembering just as Zuko's own were.

"Yes, believe me, I'm more than aware of that fact, but even though I'm proud of the great progress that she has made, especially concerning our mother, I don't trust her. I can't; the past is too muddled with our previous... history of violence." Zuko said adamantly. "And, even if I did decide to bring her here, the Earth Kingdom would declare war if they received a word, which they would, you know it as well as I do."

"Then, until Aang reveals himself from wherever it is that he has ventured, you must message the others in your group." his uncle advised after a few moments, spacing his words evenly.

A bubble of hysteria condensed in his chest, but Zuko managed to nod his head in agreement. "Fine, but only if there is no word from Aang in another week. If that happens, then I will write... the rest of the Gaang." He conceded with no small amount of bitterness, praying that his friend would miraculously return from... wherever he was.

A small smile graced his uncle's face as he poured himself another cup of tea. "And Azula?"

"We'll wait and see, uncle," he said softly, preferring to bring his sister to the Caldera instead of writing the Gaang, but he knew that would only condemn her to the Earth Kingdom's wrath.

Glancing out the window, his uncle sipped his new cup of tea, "Nephew, this situation sounds spiritual."

Zuko sighed, "And that's what I'm afraid of;"

His uncle smiled optimistically at him, "I'm sure that Aang will receive your message and fly to the Caldera as quick as possible, Zuko."

He grunted, not believing his uncle's words for a second, "Maybe, and maybe ole' heartless Ozai will turn himself in, recognizing that he's an evil-doer." He hissed out scornfully.

"You claim your father heartless, and I have to agree with your judgment, but those who are heartless, nephew, once felt too much."

Zuko turned to his uncle in stunned bewilderment, "And what are you saying, uncle?"

Golden eyes were sad as they stared back at him, "My brother never had a chance, he truly didn't."

"What are you talking about?" He glared at him, "Everyone has a choice, isn't that what you told me once?"

"Yes, but if anyone had ever been given a situation where they had had no choice, it was Ozai." Zuko's eyes ignited in disbelief, but his uncle held up a hand. "My brother had a difficult childhood, nephew, more difficult than your own in some ways."

His disdain rippled across his features, "He was tortured by his own father just as he eventually did to Azula and me?"
His uncle grimaced, "Not physically, no, but mentally and emotionally, yes. Do you know how my mother, your grandmother, Fire Lady Ilah died?"

Zuko paused as he realized that he actually didn't, "No, every time when I ever asked, I was banned from speaking of such things."

"My mother died in childbirth, bringing Ozai into this world," his uncle's eyes were dark and serious, whispers of sorrow at the edges. "It was a shock, most of all to me and my father, and we were forced to live near her murderer for years." A broken laugh abruptly escaped his uncle's lips, "I hated my brother for so long because he killed my precious mother, the woman who I loved most, and I believe that a part of me still does, but Azulon? The only reason that my father didn't kill Ozai was that of my mother's very memory, I'm certain."

"I never knew,"

"And you shouldn't have, nobody should have. It was a closely-guarded secret known only to those of the Fire Royal Bloodline, and even then, it was only I and my father who knew the truth. Not even my aunts, Li and Lo, had an inkling; everyone had always thought that my mother died peacefully in her sleep months after Ozai's birth, when she was in the very last weeks of her confinement after the birth."

Zuko's one eyebrow rose in astonishment, "Lo and Li had not even a clue?" He breathed out, "And I had always thought that they knew everything. They were older than grandfather!"

"They were from Fire Lord Sozin's first marriage," his uncle repeated the story that Zuko had heard ever since when he was a child. "For so long, it had been feared that my grandfather's Fire Lady was barren for no heirs were produced after over almost two decades of marriage, but when she eventually, finally fell pregnant, Sozin viewed it as a sign from Agni that his long-awaited-for heir was to be borne."

"But they were girls, twin girls named Li and Lo," he finished.

"Yes, and they were non-benders, too, a disgrace to the Fire Royal Bloodline, but Sozin allowed them to live for the love of his Fire Lady. You see, the birth had given him hope and Sozin believed that because his Fire Lady was still young enough, strong firebending sons would follow." His uncle summoned a small flame in his hand and stared at it, voice becoming raspy. "But no sons ever came, and in spite of the entire Fire Nation pleading with him to set her aside, with some even insisting for her execution, to marry a young noblewoman, he didn't because he loved her too much."

He frowned, "He was that selfish?" How did Sozin not see that without a proper heir, the Fire Nation would have become doomed if he had died prematurely, a civil war ensuing as rivals sought to sit on the Dragon's Throne?

His uncle chuckled with no amusement, "When it came to love and his family, yes, in stark contrast to the monster who he became once he started the Great War. In fact, when his first wife died several years after Avatar Roku, he grieved for a long time, mourning her passing for several more years, refusing to remarry at first. But he soon quickly saw the reason: he had no heirs, only two non-bending daughters, who nobody would ever accept. He didn't even have any bastard sons as possible heirs, so it was imperative that he marry. So, his eye was eventually caught by one of the most powerful noblewomen in the Fire Nation, who had inherited all of the lands and riches from her father when he had died without sons, and who was even more renowned for her prowess in firebending and, most importantly, for her young and fertile beauty. Quickly, they married, and she became heavy with child and my father was born. Sozin then declared Lo and Li
bastards, keeping the Dragon's Throne from a potential civil war if Lo and Li married some power-seeking nobles and sired Firebenders. Sozin's new wife then gave birth several more times throughout her life, to sons and daughters, all Firebenders, but they all died before they could have begotten children of their own, leaving only the senior branch of the Fire Royal Bloodline to exist. In some ways, I think that it was best. The Cousins' War is a glaring reminder of what happens when the Fire Nation has too many Firebenders with Royal Blood."

Zuko inhaled slowly, "And what's your point to this, uncle? Why are you delving into the past?"

"Because, nephew, those who forget their history are often doomed to repeat it. Fire Lord Sozin is notorious for many things, but history will never know of the great love that he held for his family. It was a love that my father sadly failed to fully inherit. His disdain for my brother was well known,"

"And that's because my father killed my grandmother," he said flatly.

His uncle smiled tightly, "Also, Lo and Li, since they were non-benders, were never allowed access to Royal security and my father had forbidden them from receiving any of the advantages and benefits that the rest of the Fire Royal Family did." His uncle leaned forward, "It was only when my father passed on, that I was able to 'convince' my brother to elevate Li and Lo, and that is when they became Azula's advisors."

Zuko furrowed his brows, "Are you also hinting that you yourself failed to inherit Sozin's great love for family? You said yourself that you hated my father, remember?"

"It wasn't until my son's death when I realized how much family truly meant to me, but by then, it was too late. The winds of fate had cemented my brother's path. For Ozai's entire childhood, my father and I both loathed him." Tears shone in his uncle's eyes, "For so long, Zuko, I hated my own brother, I truly hated him, sometimes wishing nothing more than for the Avatar to return to the world and smite him." The tears then began to spill down his uncle's cheeks, "He had killed my mother, my beloved mother, the person who I loved most in the world during that time, and my father and I proved alike, both willing to condemn an innocent baby to an entire childhood of suffering over something that wasn't even his fault."

"Well, that doesn't excuse my father for everything that he did, does it?"

"No, it doesn't, but promise me something, nephew."

"What?"

"For as long as you live, love your family, and love them all the strength in your spirit." His uncle's golden eyes were old, "Do not make the same mistakes that your grandfather and I did."

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After another week had passed, and when there was still no sign of Aang, Zuko had done as he had promised to his uncle. He wrote the Gaang, giving them a brief rundown of the situation, not even mentioning that his father had escaped prison nor that Aang was missing, and simply had ordered the message to be sent. For days, he had waited for any response, preparing himself for a blunt rejection, but in spite of his negative feelings about the task, he was thankful when he received a reply. After Aang's disappearance, he'd been paranoid that everyone in the Gaang was dead and even though he was incensed with them, that fury didn't mean that he wished them dead, a permanent residence in the Gardens of the Dead.

So, he had pleasantly been surprised when he had received a response from Sokka after only a
week. 'We're on our way.' And only a few days later, he had received Toph's own letter. 'Alright, Sparky, be there soon.' After reading it, Zuko had briefly pondered how Toph had been able to write and send the letter, but dismissed the thought, realizing that she had probably used a servant or someone to do so.

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He and his mother were feeding the Turtle Ducks when a servant approached and bowed lowly. "Fire Lord Zuko and Dowager Fire Lady Ursa," she addressed, "there are Water Tribe warriors and a single Earth Kingdom vessel at the docks who are both quite forcefully demanding to be given entrance. Are we being attacked? Do you want to sink their ships, my liege? Have Water and Earth coalesced to destroy Fire?"

He only continued to stare at the ducks fighting over the bread pieces, "No, we are not being attacked and no, I do not want to sink their ships. Order them to be allowed entrance," he ordered chewing on one of the bread pieces.

The servant bowed once again and left as quickly as she had entered. He turned to see his mother looking at him in amusement and curiosity. "You didn't let anyone, not even the boat-watchers know beforehand that your friends were coming?"

Zuko shook his head, "No, because I wanted to keep the circle of knowledge as small as possible. I don't know, but since the Earth Kingdom practically ordered me, the Fire Lord, to hand over Azula, I've been wary of a potential web of spies sent by Kuei residing in the palace. And if there is, who knows how many?"

His mother quirked an eyebrow in surprise and chuckled, "That's something that your grandfather would definitely do. He was very cunning and capricious." Her eyes darkened, and he knew that she was remembering how Azulon had ordered her banishment without hope to ever return unless Zuko himself, when he was crowned as Fire Lord, found her.

To force her to stop the memories from flooding through her mind, he smirked at her, "I had to get it from somewhere, mother. Ozai possessed none of those qualities; they were always from you and grandfather."

Shaking her head in obvious amusement, his mother's eyes were clear from the clouds of dark memories, "True, my son, very true. Well, I believe that I will excuse myself so that you can acquaint yourself with your friends again."

"Mother, you don't have to do that, and please, don't leave. I need you," he hoped that his desperation wasn't obvious, but he knew that if anyone would be able to detect it, it was his mother.

She slowly stood up and smiled down at him gently, kissing his forehead "I'll be fine, Zuko, and so will you. You are the Fire Lord, the anointed ruler of the Fire Nation, a son of Agni himself. Your friends had hurt you, yes, but they can no longer do so. Remember who you are, and you will always thrive, my beautiful boy." She kissed his forehead again and left the Royal Garden.

After his mother left, he continued to feed the Turtle Ducks, realizing that his mother was right. Although his friends had egregiously wounded him and Aang with their seeming betrayal, they could no longer wound him. Much had changed since the Great War and he was no longer that awkward boy who had inherited the Dragon's Throne. He stayed there, feeding the creatures until the female servant returned to inform him that the Water Tribe Warriors and a single lady Earthbender had arrived at the Caldera. Zuko then quickly told her to have them shown to the dining hall, and to order the kitchen staff prepare meals of celebration.
It was a… reunion, after all.

When he entered the dining hall, he was incredibly relieved that it was still empty. Although he knew that they couldn't hurt him again, he still didn't know what to suspect. How would they act? And how should he act? After all, he hadn't spoken to any of them in years, so how should he even talk to them? They were all adults now. Well, he didn't know about Toph because even though she may be twenty-years-old, she could act younger.

Zuko sat down in a chair and stared down at his formal robes, inhaling deeply as he closed his eyes, fastening the mask of the Fire Lord to his mindset, refusing to allow any bitterness to ruin the meal. And when he opened his eyes, his face was stoic, aloof, even dark. At the beginning of his reign, he had realized that he couldn't succumb to his famed temper and act like a child, so he had constructed a second personality that he was able to slip into, and the results had become a success. He had often heard whispers in the palace, heard the servants and nobles themselves hint to each other that his Agni Kai with Azula had somehow changed him, bringing forth a new Zuko, son of Ozai and Ursa, one who was incapable of showing any emotion, and he had used that to his advantage.

The doors opened across the magnificent table, and servants rushed in and kneeled before him. "Your majesty, Fire Lord Zuko, we present unto thee, the Master Sokka, next in line for Chiefdom of the Water Tribes and his beautiful wife, the Lady Suki, Master of Unarmed Combat and Stealth."

Zuko watched apathetically as Sokka and Suki were led by several Imperial Firebenders into the hall and shown to their seats. He took in their appearances, noting that they looked different, and yet the same. Sokka looked taller and broader, filled out from his lanky build, and based on the fuzz on his face, he was trying to grow a beard, but it was a failure, looking nothing like Zuko's own beard. When he gazed at Suki, he could see the echo of the girl she had been, but now, she had curves and there was a beautiful maturity in her face.

He also noticed that they both looked overwhelmed by all the customs just as Zuko had known that they would be, the sight filling him with amusement that he refused to let show on his own features.

"Your majesty, Fire Lord Zuko, we present unto thee, the Master Toph, the Lady of Earth and first Metalbender."

Zuko actually felt his one eyebrow rise at her appearance when he first saw her. Unsurprisingly, Toph's aggression was plain as she looked like she wanted to crush the imperial firebending escorts, but thankfully, no doubt because of her Bei Fong parents, she seemed to know the repercussions of such an act. She had certainly grown, in both ways. She was taller, and she had also developed a woman's figure, but based on the clothes that she wore, which were the same as during the Great War except larger, she didn't want to exhibit the changes of her new body. The guards led her to a vacant position across from Sokka and Suki, and she sat down, face turned towards the door, but Zuko knew that Toph was feeling his body's responses and his own heartbeat.

"Your majesty, Fire Lord Zuko, we present unto thee, the Lady Katara, Master of Water and the Art of Healing, the daughter of the Southern Water Tribe's Chief, Hakoda, and sister of the future Chief of the Water Tribes, the Master Sokka."

Zuko watched impassively, keeping his thoughts and shock from showing on his face as Katara was escorted into the hall. She was beautiful, breathtakingly so, and he knew that based on Toph's
reaction, his heartbeat had increased rapidly. Katara's blue gown, under the light in the room, seemed to make her skin glow, radiant as a spirit. And as she stepped towards the empty seat next to Toph, their eyes connected for only a moment, but Zuko was struck by the weight of her eyes, blue as an ocean. Her dark hair fell past her shoulders in soft, natural curls and her lips quirked at him in greeting, but he refused to allow a single emotion to cross his features and based on the fleeting hurtful look to cross her own features, he had succeeded. To him, she had certainly changed more than any of the others; while she was only a little taller, her entire body had become much more mature, her woman curves quite evident even though her outfit didn't emphasize them. She gracefully sat down in her seat and thanked the Imperial Firebenders.

The servants waited for a few seconds until there was absolute silence, then bowed, falling to their knees in unison. "All hail Fire Lord Zuko! Master of Agni's Eternal Flame! Keeper of the Dragon's Throne!" They cried out reverently, and then they quickly stood up and left the room, leaving behind an awkward silence to descend over the room's occupants.

Not shocking to Zuko, it only took several seconds for the silence to be shattered. "All right, where's the meat? I'm starving! I've been craving Komodo Chicken for the past several days now. I've envisioned tasting some of that delectable snack ever since I last had it, which was the day when we all saw that play about us on Ember Island, the one which had pretty decent effects.” Sokka smacked his lips.

Zuko inwardly sighed, wondering if the only things to change about Sokka was his body. Some things never changed, it seemed. "Chefs!" He swiftly called out, his voice booming through the room, the sight of Katara flinching at the sudden noise quite cathartic, actually.

Within seconds, the dining hall was filled with caterers and food tasters, and after only a minute, the room was cleared, Zuko's meal already checked for poison. Just as he had known they would be, the meals looked incredible and the Royal Chefs had truly outdone themselves. It seemed that he wasn't the only one who was impressed because Sokka was drooling and, in a blurred motion, quickly dug into his Komodo Chicken. In stark contrast, the rest of the group had more decorum and slowly ate their meals, trying to show that they had manners that could rival a Royal's.

Katara tried to act reserved as she stared at her brother in disgust while Toph and Suki, to Zuko, seemed amused. He himself quietly ate small increments of his fire flakes, though he didn't eat much, not really hungry, having lost his appetite when word of the arrival of the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom vessels had been given to him. However, he did drink a few glasses of firewhiskey, a lot more than he should have, but the pleasant burn spread through his chest, soothing away what few feelings of fear and nervousness he had left.

Finally, once everyone was full and had finished their meals as much as they could, Sokka began talking.

"So, how have you been, Zuko?" He questioned innocently, elbows resting on the table.

Zuko then blinked in astonishment, already knowing that this entire situation was going to be awkward, but he had had no idea that it would be this bad. "I'm doing fine," he easily lied, smiling slightly as he sipped from the firewhiskey.

Toph scrutinized him, milky eyes narrowing in consideration, and he was immensely grateful when she didn't call him out on his blatant lie.

Sokka didn't seem to feel the tense atmosphere as he then began to blabber about all the events that had happened at the Southern Water Tribe since the Great War ended and Zuko tuned him out, not caring. He felt his lips twitch slightly in a frown as he looked at Katara, who he noticed was staring down at her plate, refusing to make eye contact with any of them. Zuko was tempted
to abruptly question her to see what happened, but he decided not to, thinking it better for his psyche to leave her be.

He was then pulled back into the conversation, "So, what was this urgent business about, buddy? I didn't know that you could sound urgent about anything other than your pops, the Loser Lord."

His good eye narrowed minutely on the word 'buddy', and he felt his fists clench beneath the table. He answered anyway, though, "I'll tell you all tomorrow, okay? You've all had a trying day and should have a good night's rest in the guest apartments." He then stood up and motioned for all of them to do the same. "I'll show you to your rooms,"

"But shouldn't servants do that, Sparky?" Toph's eyes were narrowed, arms crossed.

"I want to do it" He smiled down at her, hoping that he had inherited what Azula had, the ability to always be able to smile no matter the situation.

Sokka suddenly walked up and threw his arm around him and Zuko barely suppressed his flinch and the urge to break Sokka's arm. After a moment of quelling his dark motives, he quickly realized that he was taller than his friend. "Thanks, buddy, I never had a clue that the Fire Nation, and specifically, the Royal Family and palace, was so deeply rooted in traditions."

Zuko nodded but didn't explain. He instead, led them through the palace halls silently, stopping when they had arrived in the guest wing of the palace. "This one will be Sokka and Suki's room," he glanced at them. "I assume that you would want a single room and single bed, am I right?"

A snort echoed as Sokka pulled his wife closer, "That might be the smartest thing I've ever seen ya do, buddy!"

He smiled tightly and pointed across the hall, "I'm glad I made the right decision, Sokka. Anyway, the two directly across the hall are Katara and Toph's, and you two can decide amongst yourselves over who gets to occupy which room. I don't care," he noticed Katara's searching expression towards them but ignored it.

To get away from them, he swiftly bid them a good night and turned the corner a few doors down, feeling the rage lessen, but he needed to know. So, he stopped and leaned his head near the wall, trying to listen to what they were saying.

"Huh, well, I'll be damned. That was weird," the person who spoke was clearly Sokka. "But, then again, we all know that he was always more than a little strange. He had to be with the Loser Lord as his dad and his killing machine of a sister."

"Sokka!" He heard a slap and a yelp of pain. Zuko felt comforted that, at least Suki had come to his defense.

"Well, I call dibs on that room." A raucous hoot echoed, "Now you can suck it, Sugar Queen!" He heard a door open and slam, informing him that Toph had decided to turn in for the night.

Sokka was chuckling, breathing heavily as he was laughing so hard, "That was a good one, Toph." He raised his voice as he said, and then he quieted, "Well, Suki and I are going to call it a night. So, we'll see ya tomorrow, Katara." Zuko heard Suki elegantly say goodnight to Katara and then another door shut, not near as loud as Toph's.

The tempting thought to peek around the corner to see if Katara was still in standing in the foyer was there, but he ignored the urge, thinking better of it, knowing that it would be an incredibly awkward situation. Turning away, and taking a mental mark of his location, he began a trek towards the nearest secret passage. When he arrived, he placed his heated palm against the smooth
wall and watched as a section of the wall smoothly, and almost soundlessly, opened up.

Zuko stepped through and heard the passage close, leaving no traces that it had even been there. He almost solemnly made his way to his study, and after about a few minutes, he took a sudden right and punched his fist forward. A bright flame burst out of his hand and to his left, a passage revealed itself and he strode through and into his privy chamber.

His uncle was waiting for him with a brow raised. "Didn't go well," it was a statement, not a question.

He nodded, feeling weary as he pulled out his crown, dropping it onto his desk, reclining back in his chair after he collapsed into it. He gazed at his uncle tiredly, "It went about exactly as I had thought that it would. None of them, it seems, have really changed," he admitted. "I don't understand, not even a little, how they can simply behave and act like everything is the same as it used to be, but it's not! I know that I'm being childish but frankly, I don't even care right now; I can't help the rage that I feel."

Smiling gently, his uncle nodded proudly, "You are wise, nephew, much wiser than I was when I was your age. Zuko, you have every right to feel that way. You never had any friends in your life until you joined their group, so it is all right. Then when they left and didn't contact you at all, that feeling of comfort and camaraderie turned to bitterness. And with your abandonment issues from Ursa and myself," he admitted, guilt visible in the old man's golden eyes, "it is no surprise that you feel this way. In fact, I would be incredibly worried if you felt that everything was fine."

Zuko nodded gratefully, relieved to hear that he wasn't acting or feeling petty, "Boy, and if I feel this mad, I can't even imagine the depths of Aang's bitterness and anger." The very wonder of those fathomless depths filled his mind with fear-inducing images of glowing white eyes and tattoos, trepidation spreading through his heart as he shuddered.

His uncle grimaced, lips thinning, "Yes, they did make plenty of mistakes, didn't they?"

He nodded his head and to take his mind off Aang's potential terrifying wrath and vengeance, he asked a different question. "Speaking of Aang, has there been any sign of him?"

Shaking his head soberly, his uncle's voice was grave, "The Avatar has not been sighted in over five months."

In spite of himself, he was surprised, and he cursed his hope, the hope that his friend had somewhere appeared in the past days. "And do you think, perhaps, that he's in the Spirit World?" He asked, failing to keep the hopeful inclination from throbbing in his chest.

His uncle frowned, "I honestly don't know, nephew. No one really knows of the power the Avatar wields except the Avatar themselves, and because of this, Aang could be anywhere."

Zuko pinched his nose, "I just wish that I knew where he was at. I'm worried about him," he admitted quietly.

"That is not surprising, nephew. Aang was the only one of your group whom you were able to stay in contact with. It is completely natural to want to know if someone you care about is alright." His uncle leaned forward, putting down his jasmine tea, "You should rest, nephew, a young man always needs his rest."

He nodded tiredly, rubbing his forehead in exhaustion; he hadn't slept well ever since his father had somehow escaped his prison with the aid of a dark spirit. Smiling sadly, he glanced at his uncle, "And I doubt very much that I will sleep well, uncle."
"Then at least lay down, Zuko, and close your eyes, allowing your body its much-needed reprieve."

He smiled in amusement and stood up, "Very well, your advice always seems to help, so good night, uncle" He entered the secret passage, the echo of his uncle's own 'good night' ringing in his ears, bringing solace to his wounded heart.

He took the passage to his chambers and fell on the bed, realizing that when his head connected with the plush cushion, he had forgotten his crown, leaving it in his privy chambers, but he didn't care, electing to ignore it; it would be easier to grab it tomorrow, for he was too tired now, so very tired. Slipping himself out of his robes, he sank into the covers, hoping that he would, indeed, sleep peacefully for the first time since the news of his father's escape.

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Katara stared out the window at Yue's brilliant, intoxicating light, unable to sleep, and it wasn't because the moon was full; she should be able to easily succumb to the darkness of rest, but she couldn't in spite of her great efforts to do so.

She felt guilty, and for the first time in years, she felt regret poison her mind, weighing her down, forcing her to reflect on the past, something that she hated to do. Then she would begin to think of her mother, of the charred body that still haunted her mind.

Once the Great War had ended, she had been so jubilant to finally secure the opportunity to return to her home, her village. Just the very thought of seeing Gran Gran again had cursed her to become blind to logic, only bursting with excitement and joy. Now, as she stared up at Yue, she began to delve back in her mind to those beginning days after Sozin's Comet, the moment when she had been reunited with her father and several Water Tribe warriors. Almost immediately after Zuko's coronation as Fire Lord, the Gaang had traveled to Ba Sing Se, where King Kuei and Fire Lord Zuko signed a treaty of peace, with many promises to make the world peaceful and harmonious declared, a symbol of unity between the Children of Earth and Fire. After that wonderful night in the Jasmine Dragon, they had simply left the next morning, she and Sokka and Suki, eager to meet with her father near the peninsula. And now, she wondered if they had even given a proper and heartfelt goodbye to everyone else.

And when she had finally arrived home, to the very sight of her Gran Gran waiting for her, she had willingly elected to keep the Gaang out of the forefront of her mind. So, for the first two and a half years after the Great War she had been completely focused on helping her village rebuild and teaching waterbending to some of the children, children begotten from those who had traveled with Master Pakku from the Northern Water Tribe. She had been so focused, so diligently aiding Master Pakku with creating a new Southern Water Tribe, a Tribe that would rival their Sister Tribe, the passage of time had ceased to exist in her mind.

So, when Aang had abruptly arrived at the South Pole after two whole years of no messages being exchanged between each other and having not seen him since that night at the Jasmine Dragon when she had kissed him, it had been a complete shock, a slap back to reality. He had grown, and not just physically, even though he had grown to be almost as tall as Sokka by that point. Because when he had declared that he had traveled so far to help out with reconstructing the Tribe and to visit she and Sokka, his tone had been… different, so subtle that she truly doubted that anyone else had noticed, but she did, and she began to understand her great follies after the Great War.

He was angry with them, brisk in his words, and based on how Appa had often bristled at them and refused to fly them around the Tribe, the Sky Bison was just as bitter. Katara hadn't thought that Aang was even aware of his dark emotions, but she had noticed it clearly. A blistering rage had burned in the depths of his fathomless, ancient gray eyes, and it had scared her. The
realization that Aang was no longer the boy whom she had rescued from a century's sleep was horrifying, the awareness blinding her, forcing her to see that part of the rage that had existed in him was because of her, because of she and Sokka and Suki and even Toph. Instead, he had evolved into her worst fear, becoming so terrifyingly reminiscent of when Appa had been stolen by the Sandbenders. His gray eyes had been alert and active, almost gazing upon people with distrust, only allowing the young children to approach Appa. His gray eyes had always been beautiful, one of the key features that had endeared her to trust him almost immediately after she had freed him from the Iceberg. But when she had glimpsed into his once-beautiful orbs when he was visiting she and Sokka and Suki, they had been a horrifying storm, howling and roiling with displeasure.

And when Aang had finally approached her when he was departing from the Tribe to inform her that he was 'breaking up' with her, Katara hadn't been surprised; after all, they had never written to each other and it was clear, at least to her, that things would never go anywhere, especially in her mind because the boy who he had become was not the same boy who had awoken from that Iceberg.

After a tense few months, Aang had left, emotions of thankfulness flooding through her heart, to Katara's ever most shame. It had been so awkward that even Sokka had noticed, curiously bringing it up one night during their evening's meal, and that was when Katara had simply begun to think about the reason that Aang had been so angry with them. After days of contemplation, the epiphany had hit her with the force of one of Azula's lightning strikes: it had been because of feelings of abandonment. And what he felt was justified, she had realized. She and Sokka had just left him after the night in the Jasmine Dragon and after the Great War had ended without a second's hesitation. How could she have been so blind, so terribly selfish and cruel? She had once declared to Aang that she and Sokka would be his new family, that they would remain by his side, but what they had done after the war wasn't acting like a family. A family was supposed to stick together through thick and thin; not abandon each other at a moment's notice like they had done to Aang.

Katara had, for the first time in her life, been thankful that her mother hadn't been alive because she would have been so incredibly disappointed and ashamed in her two children, forgetting the Water Tribe’s teachings about family, especially when it concerned a boy who had lost an entire world.

And with that terrible thought about her mother, with a start, she had realized that Zuko probably felt the same as Aang did, probably less, but the same emotions, nonetheless. He had been so awkward – 'Hello, Zuko here.' – when he had joined them, at least to her, and it had been too easy to see that he had never had any friends in his life, the insight into his childhood something that had essentially, along with his understanding when she had yearned for revenge towards her mother's murderer, helped her to forgive him. And even though she had spewed words of hatred and abuse at him, even though he had hunted them across the world with an utter relentlessness that had outpaced Azula's, he had never quit towards his mission to end the Great War and stop his father from securing his great-grandfather's vision. He had been determined to gain their trust even though he had had no social skills, whatsoever, and against all of the odds stacked against him, he had succeeded; Zuko had become a part of their family, an integral member of the Gaang, but what had Katara and Sokka and Toph and Suki done?

They had abandoned him, too, just as they had done to Aang – they had almost cruelly abandoned the two people in the world who most deserved a family.

She had cried after that realization, recognizing that she truly wasn't as good a person as she had claimed. For weeks, she had suffered a severe bout of misery, until finally, she had decided to question others about it. She had never brought her concerns to Sokka, no matter how much she
had wanted to because he would simply dismiss her thoughts and tell her that everything would be alright. But she did talk with Suki about the situation and her revelations, though.

"Are you afraid that we abandoned Aang and Zuko?" She looked at her friend, wringing her hands together in anxiety.

Suki pursed her lips. "No, I don't really think so. To me, at least, I don't think so. I hardly knew them, to be honest. I only knew Zuko as the angry teenager who tried to burn Kyoshi Island until Sokka forced us to interact at the Boiling Rock, and that's when I began to realize that he wasn't truly such a bad person. And he continued to add evidence to that belief the more I came to know him until Sozin's Comet."

"And Aang?"

"I only knew him as the Avatar," she shrugged. "The only time I believe that I ever saw him remotely angry was when I ran into you guys and we journeyed through the Serpent's Pass."

Katara shuddered, still having nightmares from that enraged version of Aang, a being whose power was unequal, who during that moment, had ceased to be Aang. He had become a monster of thousands of years of power and knowledge, glaring down at her like a god, the glowing eyes a death sentence. "Oh, you have no idea,"

"But that's all I truly know about him Katara besides the basics: he's the Avatar, he's the last of the Airbenders, he's a prodigy, a vegetarian, that his best friend is Appa, and he struggled over whether or not he should kill Ozai."

Katara nodded at her friend's words, afraid that was all she would ever receive, but she had to try. "But doesn't it bother you that we haven't heard from either one in years, discounting the fact that Aang was here for a few months?" She asked almost desperately.

Suki was about to answer when Sokka came bursting into the hut. "Suki, you won't belie- oh, hey, Katara. You won't believe what we found! Come on!"

That had been the end of the conversation and Katara had never brought it up again, too fearful to do so, in all honesty. Instead, she had continued doing what she had been: helping her people rebuild and teaching waterbending. Years passed, and she grew older, becoming a woman, and that's when her father had approached her about potential suitors for marriage. Every unmarried man who had journeyed from the North had asked her father for her hand in marriage, shocking Katara - she had had no idea.

Her father had inquired as to any potential interest on her part, but she had refused, not even thinking of marriage, especially since no one truly entered her mind for such a thought. For a couple more years, her father had been appeased by her constant refusals, but one day, it had changed. He had demanded that she do her duty as the daughter of the Southern Water Tribe's Chief and marry someone who could strengthen their Tribe's power. To her horror, her father had given her a list of suitable candidates who had messaged her father, expressing interest in a marriage match. King Kuei's name had been at the top, along with all of the other Kings of the Major Earth Kingdom Cities except King Bumi, and several nobles in the Fire Nation had even been on the list, along with a few of the Northern Water Tribe warriors who she had dueled all of those years ago.

And then, at the bottom of the list, Zuko's name had been underlined, the only one on the list. She had wet her lips, heart beating faster at the thought of Zuko, Fire Lord Zuko, inquiring about a marriage to her, and asked her father. But then she had refused to acknowledge the sadness that had rushed through her heart when her father had disclosed that that hadn't been the case; her
father had written the Fire Lord's name as a more than eligible candidate, but Zuko himself had never messaged him.

Her Gran Gran had even begun to pressure her, adding fuel to Katara's ever-increasing age. How could her Gran Gran fault her? She herself had run away from the Northern Water Tribe to avoid such a fate! Katara had been appalled to hear of her beloved grandmother stressing to her about the need for her to marry, especially since she was still young and beautiful. And when Katara had insisted that her Gran Gran should be proud of her, her response had been grating. "You are a fully-grown woman, Katara! I was merely a girl when I was betrothed, but you are over six years older than I was during that time. You are being selfish by refusing so many good men, and rumors have begun to spread amongst the men, ones of very... unsavory activities that you partake in."

That was when she had realized that in spite of her changing Pakku's mind, she wouldn't be able to change an entire culture's, an entire nation's. And the lowest point she had experienced in years had happened when her father, not even a few months ago, had decreed that she had one year to choose a husband from the list he had given her, and if she surpassed the deadline, her father would marry her to King Kuei of Ba Sing Se, with or without her blessing.

Rage and devastation had warred with each other, the hurt shining through, "How could you do this to me?" She had screamed at him, remembering how Sokka had simply sat in the background, unwilling to say a word.

Her father had looked down at her, "You've given me no choice, Katara," her only consolation had been that tears had shone in his eyes. "I'm not becoming younger and I need to ensure that the Southern Water Tribe will be in a successful position when I step down, or spirits forbid, pass on. And that entails creating prosperous marriage alliances for my children."

"But what about Sokka?" She had pointed towards her brother, "He and Suki have been married for years! They got to choose!"

"And so do you, Katara! You have a choice!" Her father snapped, looking angrier than she had seen him since the Great War. "I've been most generous in my dealings about this, I truly have, but I've finally been an Earthbender and put my foot down: you have a year. And plus, Suki hails from Kyoshi Island, one of their most beloved citizens, a more than worthy ally to our Tribe, an ideal wife for our future Chief – and the Chief of the North, too."

Katara had never been so angry with her father, not even after Aang's injury after the fall of Ba Sing Se or when he had left to join the Great War. "If mom were alive, she'd be ashamed to be married to you!" She had jumped to her feet, eyes blazing with fury, ignoring Sokka's sharp inhalе. Her father had looked away for several moments, but when he looked back down at her, his face had been hard. "Perhaps you are right, Katara, maybe, but she would be ashamed of you, too, so don't condemn me, your father, who is only doing what's best for his children and his entire Tribe, when you are just as guilty as me. You have a year to choose, and my mind will not be changed. Be grateful that I am not Arnook; he had given his daughter Yue only an order to marry, in Sokka's words, the fucking bastard, and that was it, no chance to rebel or refuse." With those words, he had exited the room, the silence deafening.

Sokka had finally then stood from his position, looking serious. "I know that this is hard for you, but you have an unhealthy tendency to become a selfish bitch, you really do." His eyes had become hard, "You know, I've never forgotten what you said to me all of those years ago when you and Zuko went to search for mom's murderer: 'then you didn't love her as much as I did.' Dad was right, you know? Mom would have, at least during that moment, been ashamed of you."
After her father's words, and Sokka's declaration, she had shut herself away, refusing to submit, but eventually, she had realized that her destiny was cemented. Feeling lonelier than she could ever remember, she had attempted to write both Zuko and Aang but had ever been able to words on the parchment.

She had been too much of a coward to begin communicating with either of them after her revelation all of those years ago, and now it was far too late to begin to do so. And because of her cowardice, the rift between them seemed insurmountable.

Weeks passed and that's when they had received Zuko's letter, shocking everyone, and she hadn't known what to do upon reading it. 'I need you all here. Extremely urgent. Fire Lord Zuko.'

She had chosen to leave because she did miss Zuko, a lot more than she wanted to admit, and because she needed to be away from her father, from the pressure on her to marry.

It had been a relief to see Toph again on the docks of the Fire Nation, and it had been like times had never changed, but it became more than apparent that they had, indeed, changed – and not necessarily for the better.

When she and Sokka and Suki and Toph had finally arrived at the palace and were shown into the dining room, Katara had been incredibly saddened, but not surprised, at what happened. Zuko, the Fire Lord, had been completely stiff. His face had shown no emotion when it had used to be so easy to read for her; it had been like viewing a rotating series of theater masks: angry, disgust, despair, loneliness, and more anger.

He had also changed physically, as well. He stood taller than Sokka by a few inches and he had somehow become impossibly handsome; Zuko was... beautiful. Towering over most men, his powerful presence was felt by all. He was a man now, not the boy who had taken the throne after Sozin's Comet. He was very muscular and well-proportioned, alarmingly similar to Ozai when Katara had had the displeasure of seeing the monster. His eyes burned with golden flames, flecked with fire, set in a broad face, and his brows had been noble and arched. His hair was the lustrous black that she had always remembered, and it settled down to his shoulders in curls. He had a close-trimmed beard coating his face that made him look even more beautiful; unlike Sokka's attempt at a beard, Zuko's was... sexy, heightening his strong cheekbones and his full lips.

Despite herself, she could still remember the rush of arousal that had flooded her body when she first saw him, specifically when their eyes had locked for a moment. She had tried to think of something to say through the entire meal, but nothing came of it.

Every response that he had given at dinner was clipped, and when he had shown them to their rooms, he had left as quickly as possible, not even glancing at her.

It was disheartening, quite painfully so. Once she had forgiven him for Ba Sing Se after he had helped her find Yon Rha, they had seemed to communicate so easily afterward. Now, he didn't even say a word to her, wouldn't even look at her.

She was determined to change that. She wanted to no longer feel the guilt and she wanted her friend back, and possibly even more – his name on her father's list was a constant flame on the edge of her mind, flickering and growing larger the longer she thought about. With her decision made, tomorrow would be the day when she would speak to Zuko and hopefully, progress would be made in reconciling their friendship.

XxXxXxXxXxX

Zuko sat in his privy chamber with his uncle waiting for the Gaang to be brought in, feeling quite
relaxed from his decent night's sleep, and his uncle's steady presence was also a relief his warring mind.

His eyes darted to the side when the doors swung open and the heroes of the Great War were escorted in by a group of servants, the imperial firebending guards standing at attention, ready for any potential threats.

"Good to see you, Iroh." Toph went over and socked his uncle on the shoulder.

His uncle smiled, "It is good to see you as well, Master Toph." He pulled the Earthbender down into a fierce hug before she could react and Zuko felt his lips twitch at the disgruntled expression on Toph's face as his uncle let her go.

Sokka cut to the chase before any more pleasantries could be given, "So why did you call us here, and shouldn't Aang be here? Where is he?" He glanced at his uncle, "And yes, it is good to see you, as well, General Iroh."

"And it is a pleasure for my eyes to see you all once again," he nodded his head, sipping his cup of tea.

"So, as my husband asked, where's Avatar Aang?" Suki raised a delicate eyebrow.

He exhaled and stared at them for several seconds, observing their expressions and body language. Sokka was leaning against the chair that Suki was sitting on, eyes narrowing more as Zuko continued not to answer. Toph blew her bangs out of her unseeing eyes and his uncle, who was sitting next to her, laughed quietly, and finally, Katara was actually meeting his eyes, gazing back at him intently.

That was new because last night, during the meal, she hadn't even looked at any of them except to glare at her brother when he had begun eating his Komodo Chicken.

After meeting her stare evenly, not allowing a single emotion to slip through, he sighed and finally answered, "The reason that I messaged you all, requesting for you to come to the Caldera was that my… father has escaped from his prison."

There was dead silence for a few moments, and then Sokka exploded, jumping from his slouched position to erect, eyes on the verge of hysteria, looking reminiscent of Zuko's mother when she had informed him of the news. "What? How the fuck could this happen?" They all seemed to be on alert, eyes wide with panic, even Toph.

Zuko waved his hand to his uncle and was grateful when he took over, his steady voice recounting everything perfectly. "My brother's cell was found empty a little over two months ago, and on top of that egregious news, the circumstances around his disappearance should all give us a cause to pause in concern."

"How so?" Katara asked sharply and Zuko was almost amused that she apparently still knew how to speak considering that all she had done since he had seen her was to stare at her plate and himself.

He missed what his uncle had said in response to Katara's question, but he easily assumed it was about what the guards had described, based on the paleness on the Gaang's features.

"So, then why isn't Twinkletoes here? This is something that he should deal with, isn't it?" Toph questioned bluntly, hands clenched tightly into fists.

Zuko almost laughed aloud for he had certainly missed the Earthbender's spunk, but interrupted
his uncle before he could answer, rather electing to answer himself. "The Avatar, from everything that I've gathered, hasn't been sighted by anyone in over five months." He frowned, rubbing his forehead, feeling his exhaustion begin to poison him once again. "I've seen countless messages to all of the Air Temples, receiving no responses from any of them except the North Temple – all the Mechanic had said was that none of them had seen Aang in a long time, years if I'm to believe."

"Well, where is he?" Katara demanded after several moments.

He raised his only brow, wondering if she had listened to a word he had just said. "I don't know, nobody does, from what I know, and trust me, I know a lot." He reiterated.

Sokka was serious for once, eyes thoughtful and narrowed. "Okay, everyone, so, we know two things: the Loser Lord has escaped from his presence with help from this 'dark' presence, and that's all without his firebending, and Aang, the Avatar, hasn't been around for several months." He summed up.

Nodding his head, Zuko finally took a sip from the tea that his uncle had graciously prepared for him. "Now, can you all understand why I called you here? I can admit that I need help and I figured that you guys could do offer aid."

Suki scrutinized him, "Why didn't you call us sooner? Your father's been missing for over two months!"

Zuko shrugged and easily invented an explanation, recognizing that Azula would, indeed, be proud of him. "I thought that I could handle it, and I have since seen that I was wrong. Then, once I realized that Aang wasn't going to answer, I wrote all of you." He lied.

Toph frowned but didn't let it be known to everyone that he had been lying through his teeth, and Zuko was thankful. He had always known that out of all of the Gaang, besides Aang himself, of course, Toph would be the one who he felt the least resentment for. While they had connected during the end of the Great War, it wasn't the type of connection that he had felt with Aang, Katara, Sokka, and even Suki.

Although, he had realized that she probably understood him better than everyone else, save Aang. She had grown up in the Bei Fong household, one of the richest Noble Families in the entire Earth Kingdom, and her upbringing would have undoubtedly conflicted with her personality. She understood wanting a parent's love and had been the only one of the Gaang who had given him a chance when he had followed them to the Western Air Temple after the failed invasion on the Day of Black Sun.

His uncle calmly sipped his tea and butted in, rubbing his beard. "What we need to focus on is what we should do until the Avatar returns, I believe." He advised.

Sokka stroked his peach fuzz that-he-called-a-beard in thought, "Well, does anyone have any ideas because I only have one, and it's rather obvious: to me, this sounds like a bunch of spirit mumbo jumbo."

Tilting his head in Sokka's direction, his uncle nodded, features pulled in contemplation. "And those have been my thoughts exactly, Master Sokka."

"And that theory does align with what the Fire Sages had told me when I questioned them. You see, they had investigated my father's cell and had concluded that it was something that they've never felt before. Based on research in the Dragon Bone Catacombs, an event like this has never been recorded in my nation's history." Zuko said tiredly, now wishing that he had slept even better the previous night.
"Well, this sounds like Twinkletoes kind of problem." Toph shrugged, "I don't know what any of us could do. There are no ideas up here to help." She tapped her head.

Sokka abruptly snickered, "Just like there never are!" He didn't see the punch coming until it was too late, and he was quickly sprawled on the floor. A bruise was blossoming across his cheek, but he grinned as he stood back up. "Totally worth it,"

Toph cracked her knuckles ominously and Sokka quickly sat down, molding himself beside Suki, for what Zuko believed to be protection.

The Earthbender's features pinched, "Before I was so rudely interrupted by Snoozles over there, I was also going to say that I'm sure I'm not the only one who has never heard of anything like this."

"Have you interrogated all the prison staff?" Suki asked abruptly, leaning forward, hand clutching Sokka's leg.

His uncle answered, voice calm. "Yes, Zuko and I were present during these interrogations, and nobody knew anything detailing the dark presence."

Toph piped in, "They could have been lying," she pointed out, eyebrows raised almost condescendingly.

"And they weren't," he growled out shortly, feeling his temper begin to boil.

"How do you know that? You're not an Earthbender." Katara gazed at him intensely.

He met her stare evenly once more, "There bodies didn't heat up. When someone lies, their body temperature around the nose and eyes increase quite dramatically, so powerful Firebenders, like me and uncle, can sense the change." He explained.

Katara's eyes widened, "You can do that?" She breathed out.

"I taught it to him when I had arrived a month ago," his uncle cut in.

Toph looked impressed, "That's a pretty nice trick, Sparky,"

Sokka seemed doubtful, though, and then he spoke. "But couldn't Firebenders keep their body heat at the same level, then, even if they were lying?"

Before Zuko could answer, his uncle did so instead, "It is an ability that is known only to the Fire Royal Family, and now you four, as well. Fire Lord had discovered the ability and passed that knowledge onto my father, who then passed it onto me. Now, I have since passed it onto Zuko." His uncle smiled at him and Zuko felt him return the smile softly.

Before they could become even more off topic, he quickly redirected the conversation back to the problem, "So, no one has any ideas about this dark presence, am I correct?"

They all shook their heads and Zuko closed his eyes in disappointment; it is what he had been afraid of, them being unable to help. He slowly opened his lids and looked to his uncle, observing his raised eyebrow, the expectant gleam in his golden eyes, and Zuko clenched his jaw, shaking his head – he was not going to message Azula!

Toph felt his reaction and looked to his uncle, "What is it, old man? What did you look like for Sparky to blow a small fuse?"
His uncle stared at Zuko as he answered, golden eyes urging and beckoning. "I've had a suggestion that I've given to Fire Lord Zuko for the past couple weeks, but he has refused each time, believing it to be nonsensical." The triumphant glimmer in his uncle's orbs was hard to miss and Zuko almost laughed; his uncle was quite the competitive man. Now, he was almost looking forward to the Gaang's reaction at his uncle's suggestion, almost.

"Well, let's hear it then. Anything would be better than nothing." Sokka said confidently.

His uncle smiled victoriously, "Well, since you insist, Master Sokka: I suggest that we bring Azula into the fold."

Silence reigned eternally through the room as the Gaang processed what his uncle had just said until it was pierced by a recovered Sokka.

"WHAT?" He screeched like a beast, "Are you mad? That's insane, you damned fool! Have you forgotten that she's tried to kill all of us and almost succeeded in killing Aang? I take back what I said! Nothing is better!"

Katara joined in, features flashing with betrayal. "How could you suggest that, Iroh? She'll just try to kill us again. She's probably the one who organized Ozai's escape!"

Zuko put a swift end to that angle, "My sister did not have anything to do with our father's escape, I know it." He said adamantly. While his sister was many things and had done many things, he knew for certain that she would never help Ozai; she hated the man. They both did and that was one of the things they had been able to bond over while Azula had been imprisoned. Plus, she hadn't even been in the Caldera when their father had escaped, and it was clearly a spirit's work – the dark presence.

"Yes, she could have! She was utterly loyal to the monster." Katara cried out, oceanic blue eyes flashing.

Zuko clenched his smoking fists beneath his desk, "We both hate him, but the only difference, the crucial difference was that I didn't have to live with him while I was a teenager, and I realized who I was becoming and joined you guys to stop him and end the Great War."

Katara looked to argue, but Toph cut in. "He's telling the truth, Sugar Queen." Her words floated in the air, and Katara swallowed, looking like she had tasted something acidic.

He looked towards Suki, "What do you think, Suki? I know that it's a lot to ask, especially considering the… history between you two, but the options are more than limited." She had been silent while the Water siblings had heart attacks over his uncles' suggestion.

He looked at Zuko with clear eyes, relieving him. "She would be a good asset, that's for certain. She has a sharp mind and is, of course, a powerful bender," she admitted. "But that was all before her mind broke, so the only one who can determine if she would be qualified to help with this problem is you, Fire Lord Zuko."

Zuko thought of his last conversation with Azula when he had notified her of the Earth Kingdom's demands for her head, about how, when he had checked the next day, all of the guards had been alive and hadn't even known that the Princess had escaped.

He looked up, "She is qualified, she definitely is,"

His uncle grinned mischievously, "Don't you see, nephew? I told you that this would be an excellent idea." He sipped his tea in success.
Zuko shook his head, "No!" He roared, shocking everyone, "Don't you see, uncle? If I bring her in, then Kuei will declare war!" He growled out.

Toph and his uncle were the only ones who didn't seem horrified, but everyone else was, their features carved with shock and dread.

"Kuei wouldn't do that!" Katara exclaimed, features looking immensely panicked for some reason.

"I must say that that doesn't sound like him." Sokka rubbed his beard.

Suki had looked surprised but chose not to comment.

"The only Great War reparations the Earth Kingdom wanted were the conquerors of Ba Sing Se. I was forced to hand over Mai and Ty Lee, but they escaped before they were handed over and I had to banish them. I argued for Azula's stay in the Fire Nation by telling Kuei of my sister's mental health. I was concerned that she would kill some of his guards. Kuei let the matter go until a little over three months ago when Ba Sing Se demanded Azula be handed over or the Great War would ravage the world again." He sighed tiredly.

Toph looked at him strangely, no doubt knowing that he had lied about Mai and Ty Lee, but she thankfully didn't disclose that information to everyone else.

Katara gasped, looking incredibly hurt, "No! Kuei would never do that!"

Zuko stared at her solemnly, "But he did, Katara, I can show the letter if you would like."

She shook her head raggedly, but she didn't say anything, almost curling into herself.

"Wait, so is ole' Lightning Psycho in Ba Sing Se, then?" Toph suddenly asked, features enlightened.

He and his uncle exchanged glances and then, his uncle answered. "Azula escaped from her prison the day of the transfer was to take place, and no one has seen her since," he informed.

Zuko closed his eyes in irritation; his uncle was truly out to embarrass him, it seemed. He had been going to ease into that part of the story, but that plan was apparently now out the window because his uncle was so mischievous.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Katara demanded, every emotion from Kuei's declaration of war forgotten, only replaced by a burning fire in her blue eyes.

"Then, she is the one who concocted the Loser Lord's escape!" Sokka raised his pointer finger for emphasis, and it looked like everyone in the Gaang agreed with his declaration, nodding their heads fiercely in understanding.

The candles in the room flared brightly for a split second until Zuko calmed himself. "I was going to tell you," he glared at his uncle who only simply smiled back at him innocently. He shook his head and looked back at the rest of the group, "As I said before, Azula did not help our father escape. It's a fact."

Katara looked livid, "No, it's a delusion because you wish that your sister wasn't a freak. Don't you see? She had to have done it because it makes perfect sense! She's a monster loyal to another monster!"

Zuko finally decided to let the secret be known. "I let my sister escape! I'm the one who created the plan!" He growled out, smashing his hand onto his desk, an ominous crack spider-webbing
through the wood. The candles roared in response to his emotions and everyone, save for his uncle, flinched. He suddenly looked at the large doors, knowing that the imperial firebending guards had just heard his words.

Knowing that his temper was brimming over, but caring anymore, he ignored everyone else, turning his body toward the doors. "Guards!" He boomed out, disregarding the looks of wariness on the Gaang's features.

The imperial firebending guards immediately swung the doors open and all kneeled before him, "Fire Lord Zuko," they all intoned.

His lips curved downwards in a frown, "I'm only going to say this once, so listen to my words." He leaned forward, looming over their inferior forms, looking every bit the monstrous Fire Lord. "The statements that you heard just moments earlier about the Princess Azula will never leave your lips, nor will they ever be communicated with another person via parchment or any other ways that you could possibly think of. Do you swear?"

"Yes, Fire Lord Zuko," they all said at once, still bowed.

Zuko felt some of the tension release from his shoulders, "And you all know the consequences for a violation of your oath, of course, so I mustn't repeat them. Now leave us and return to your posts."

Still keeping their heads bowed, the guards walked out of the room, finally closing the doors once they had cleared.

"Why would you let Lightning Psycho escape, Sparky?" Toph was staring at him curiously after the guards had left, not seeming at all disgusted by what he had just done, unlike Katara and Sokka and even Suki.

"Because she's my sister," he said simply, honestly. "I love her no matter what she's done to me. It may be easy for you all to scorn her very existence, hating her so fiercely that your heart begins to pound, but you don't remember as I do. I remember when we were children before our mother left and we were true siblings, willing to do anything for one another. I know that girl is still in Azula, I know it for certain because I've seen it with my own eyes. That's why I let her escape, Toph."

Silence fell upon the room, and Katara and Sokka looked at each other. Zuko didn't care what they were thinking for he was exhausted now.

His uncle thankfully noticed his fatigue and spoke up, "I believe that this is the best solution we have until the Avatar is found." He gestured to the group, "And if any of you have potentially better ideas, we would happily hear them, but you don't have any, do you?"

None of them were happy about but they all agreed: Azula would be brought into the picture and they would all work together.

"So where is Lightning Psycho, Sparky? You said that you orchestrated her escape, so you must know where she is at." Toph's blunt voice broke the silence.

Looking at his uncle, Zuko sighed aloud, knowing that he would have to tell them. "She's on Ember Island, at our old house," he said reluctantly.

"What? How could you?" Katara glared at him, all of her displeasure shown in her blue eyes, but Zuko was unmoved. "There are innocents there!"

He rolled his eyes, almost scoffing at her, "Azula is not going to kill anybody on the island, and
she hasn't – and she has had months to do so! Plus, if she had actually killed someone, I would have known." The death of someone on Ember Island was big news. The most powerful Noble Houses would often stay there, so he, as the Fire Lord, would immediately hear about any incidents on the island.

Katara clenched her jaw but let the matter drop, switching the subject. "Now what do we do?"

Zuko closed his eyes briefly and sensed the sun was at midday. "Well, let's have you all go eat lunch while I write Azula," he suggested, needing to be away from them and their bristling presences.

Suki looked at him suspiciously and Zuko raised his one eyebrow in response, challenging her. "Why do you want to write Azula right now? You could do it later," she pointed out.

"So that I can get it over with," he said, letting the pure exhaustion that he felt to echo in his words.

"He's telling the truth," Toph informed Suki, who seemed to be appeased at Toph's words and dropped the matter.

Sokka's eyes were begging to be released so Zuko waved his hand, "Go to the dining hall and the kitchen staff should already have your meals prepared."

The future Chief of the Water Tribes bolted out of the room and Suki followed him but in a more dignified pace. Toph whispered something to his uncle and soon followed after the married couple.

Katara was, for some reason, still seated and looked hesitant in his opinion. "I was wondering if I could talk to you, Zuko," she glanced at his uncle. "Alone," she stressed, looking desperate.

To his displeasure, his uncle smiled and stood up, "I was about to leave anyways, Lady Katara." He walked out the door and Zuko noticed the guards bow to his uncle before the doors shut.

Now he was alone in the room with the woman who he might have been halfway in love with when the Great War had ended. He cursed his uncle's willingness to put him in awkward and potentially embarrassing situations.

She avoided Zuko's piercing gaze by looking at his study, and to Katara's surprise, it was actually quite large and decorated exquisitely, looking like it belonged to a King, which it did. Zuko sat behind his desk and directly behind him, was a large bookshelf that covered the entire wall, and by his desk, there was a very comfortable couch, which was where Zuko's uncle had been seated.

For several moments, she continued to avoid Zuko, instead choosing to contemplate King Kuei, her potential husband. When she had first heard the news, she had been horrified, unable to picture the nice and naïve man who she had met in Ba Sing Se all of those years ago declaring a threat of war against Zuko.

She then began to have the thought that if she continued to rebel against her father, would he still marry her to the man Kuei had become? From what it sounded like, King Kuei of Ba Sing Se had changed for the worse, and while he hadn't seemed too bad to marry, now he was a nightmare to Katara.

Long ago she had memorized the names on the list, and none of them appealed to her at all, even though she had ruled Kuei the most tolerable, but that was when she had realized that Zuko's
underlined name was on it, away from all of the other names the very man whose palace she was currently in. She wouldn't mind marrying Zuko, especially since it would greatly benefit the Water Tribes. She would try to potentially convince the Fire Lord himself, Zuko, to see that a marriage between them could be a good thing. After all, from everything that she had heard since arriving in the Fire Nation, the Fire Lord had no heirs except for his sister, who nobody would accept, and had no wife or girlfriend.

Katara had always yearned to have children of her own, and when she and Aang had dated, the thought of a brood of airbending children had been a nice and terrifying thought, and the very thought of being Mother to the Air Nomads was one of dread. She didn't want that kind of pressure, especially since it would be difficult for her and Aang to ever conceive Airbenders. She was a Waterbender and Aang was all of the elements: a Waterbender, Earthbender, Firebender, and Airbender. Thus, the probability of airbending children between them would be incredibly low.

But she knew that with Zuko, she wouldn't be under near as much pressure. Plus, she had always thought him handsome, even with his scar – which she still didn't know how he had received. But now, he was incredibly handsome, the most handsome man she had ever seen. Plus, they had always shared such a connection after she had forgiven him, and she desired that kind of connection with her husband.

Gathering her courage, Katara fiddled with her hands and brought her gaze back to the Fire Lord, "So, um… how are you?" She cringed the moment the words escaped her lips. That was not the way she had wanted to begin this conversation.

Zuko tilted his head to the side for a moment, and then he shrugged. "I'm fine," he seemed so nonchalant and unconcerned and it filled Katara with anger. How could he be so calm and unemotional when she herself felt as if she was bursting through the seams of her very body?

"Don't lie!" She glared at him, recognizing almost immediately that she had made a mistake, but she continued, wanting to see the real Zuko, the on-the-brink-of-manhood boy she had shared such a connection with before Sozin's Comet. "You have heavy bags under your eyes and you won't even talk to any of us, preferring to your uncle almost every time." She refused to count the meeting as 'talking'. It was clear to her that he hadn't done that of his own free will, rather he had done it because he needed to.

Zuko's right eye narrowed to match the permanent glare from his left eye. "Excuse me?" He hissed.

Finally, some emotion other than weariness and the brief protective rage that he somehow felt for his sister! This was the Zuko she remembered. "You heard me," she stared into his furious eyes - golden vs blue!

Zuko's scar seemed more evident, "You have no right to ask me that!" He spat out, climbing to his feet, glaring down at her, intimidating her, but she refused to stop. "In fact, you should be grateful that I even messaged you at all. If it wasn't for my uncle, I would have left you all in the dark and would have simply waited for Aang to return, no matter how long it took. None of you deserve my hospitality."

Katara frowned because even though she knew that he was right after the way they had treated him, it still hurt to hear, hurt a lot. She stared solemnly at Zuko's scowling form. "I know," she whispered. "We were all terrible, weren't we? Especially me when I had elected to, of my own free will, ignore your entire existence, the very Fire Lord himself, for eight years." She swallowed and felt the tears well in her eyes, beginning to spill down her cheeks, "I'm sorry, Zuko, so terribly sorry and I'm so ashamed. I was a disgusting friend and I realize now how much our actions have
wounded you," she said in regret.

His right eye widened in surprise, and to her understanding, he clearly hadn't expected her to understand his anger. She had learned a lot about Zuko after she had forgiven him, and it made her actions after the Great War even more vile in her mind. He always expected people would never understand his feelings, and even worse, he always thought the wickedness of everyone, refusing to acknowledge any potential good.

Zuko was frozen, staring at her blankly, no emotion showing for several seconds, and just when Katara had thought she succeeded, his face twisted into something dark, almost malevolent. "Get out," he said quietly, the very look in his golden eyes reminding her of Azula during the Great War. All of a sudden, she had the ridiculous thought that he was going to try to kill her, and when he stepped forward, fear spread through her mind. Towering over her, his golden eyes stripped her bare of every defense she could have potentially created. "I said, 'get out', Katara." He said it quietly and she stubbornly shook her head, knowing that if she could stay a little longer, she could repair all of the damage, and maybe even potentially broach the subject of a marriage.

"No, I know that-"

"If you don't leave, I will order the guards to take you to your rooms, your choice." He interrupted, rage and dark fury spreading across his handsome face the longer that she refused to leave. When she didn't immediately back away, his eyes became alight with a monstrous glow, the flames in the room exploding, "LEAVE!" He roared like a Dragon, a fiery glow shining in his open mouth, and Katara realized that he could hurt her, very flames spewing out of his mouth to burn her.

The guards surged through the doors, fists of fire aimed directly at her, the situation fully out of Katara's control.

"Fire Lord Zuko, is this woman a threat to you?" One of the guards asked, the others' fire burning brighter at the accusation.

Eyes full of fear, she looked at Zuko, pleading with him. After a moment, Zuko sighed and collapsed back in his chair, anger still carved into his face, the very candles shifting sporadically with his every breath. "No, guards, we just had a simple disagreement and my temper was provoked. I am at fault," his golden eyes burned as they connected with her blue ones. "The Lady Katara didn't know the situation, and I apologize to her."

Swallowing hard, recognizing that he had saved her dignity, rather taking the blame himself when she was absolutely at fault. She bowed her head, trying to copy the guards' movements from earlier when Zuko's role in Azula's escape had been almost public knowledge. "Forgive me, Fire Lord Zuko, I realize now that I was out of turn. I thank you for your mercy and grace, far greater than I deserve." She whispered the last part, knowing that it was true.

Zuko's eyes softened a little at the last part and it gave her hope for her future, "Thank you, Lady Katara, it relieves me that we have come to an understanding. Guards, you are all to return to your post, guiding Lady Katara to wherever it is she wishes to go. I yearn to be alone with my thoughts."

Katara wasn't about to ruin the situation by demanding that she wanted to still talk to him, so she complied, walking out with the guards, the doors slamming shut behind her.

One of the guards looked down at her, their terrifying faceplate connecting with her still tear-stained eyes. "Lady Katara, where would you like to go? I will escort you to anywhere you like, just as Fire Lord Zuko ordered."
She inhaled slowly, "I would like to return to my room," she smiled tightly. "I know the way, so there is no need to escort me."

The guard stared down at her for a moment, and she was fearful that he would insist on escorting her, but he nodded his head. "Very well, Lady Katara, have a fruitful day."

"Thank you," she turned and walked past the other guards, but one of the last ones turned to her.

His voice was low, "Fire Lord Zuko is known throughout the entire nation as an emotionless Fire Lord, Lady Katara. He is infinitely suspicious and waits for betrayal, a dark Prince who trusts no one except a close few. The fact that you brought out several emotions in him speaks of his fondness for you,"

Katara felt sorrow at his words, about how far Zuko had fallen because none of the Gaang had stayed in contact with him, but also a pleasure. "Thank you, you have lifted my spirits." She nodded her head in thanks and slowly walked back to her room, the exchanged words with Zuko echoing in her mind, mocking her.

Once she finally entered her room, she collapsed on her bed, feeling the tears well as she gently touched her mother's necklace, "Mom, what should I do?" She asked brokenly to the empty room.

Like she had expected and known, no answer was given to reprieve her sorrow.

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Zuko couldn't remember the last time he was this angry. After the guards and Katara had finally left, his suppressed fury had finally surged to the forefront of his mind, and he was breathing heavily and the candles were flaring sporadically.

How dare she? She had no right to ask him those things, none of them!

He needed to calm down, recognizing that he would only hinder his plans if he drowned under his rage, so he closed his eyes and pictured the fire that he had made on Ember Island when he had visited with Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee. That had truly been the first time when he had realized that what he was doing was wrong, that who he was under his father's grasp once more wasn't who he wanted to be. That night of revelations had been the catalyst for his change.

His breathing gradually began to even out and Zuko sighed wearily, wondering how Katara could have possibly believed that she understood what he was feeling. She had had no right to do that. He did actually feel bad about scaring her but that was heavily overshadowed by his deep-seeded anger.

Once suitably calm, he pulled out a scroll and wrote his sister the details of the mess. Once he was finished, he stamped the Royal Seal on the parchment and ordered the guards to have the message sent off to his house on Ember Island.

They didn't even bat an eye at his strange request, probably realizing that his sister had taken residence there after her escape, but they knew better than to tell anyone. Instead of showing emotion, they only bowed before him and complied with his order.

Zuko went over to the couch his uncle had sat on, feeling his exhaustion more acutely than before, and laid down on the plush cushion, feeling sleep beckoning like a selfless lover. Complying with the yearn for rest, he closed his eyes and settled his warring thoughts, knowing that he could deal with the Katara fiasco at a later time.
Well, that's all for this one. Please pray for the victims who were a part of the Las Vegas shooting.

**Ozai escapes and Zuko believes it to be a spirit, and Aang hasn't been seen in months! Eventually, through the help of his uncle, he writes the Gaang and they all show up, leading to a very tense atmosphere.

**Okay, in Canon, we've hardly ever heard of Fire Lady Ilah, wife of Fire Lord Azulon, and the mother of Iroh and Ozai. By the time of Azulon's death, we already know that she had died previously. It was clearly also shown that Iroh was Azulon's favorite and besides being the firstborn, I wanted another reason: the reason Ilah died was that of Ozai's birth. Because Ozai technically 'murdered' his mother, Azulon and Iroh both resented him greatly, though Iroh eventually tries to make amends, but by then, it's too late. I think that it greatly 'gels together' with Azulon's actions in *Chapter One*, when he had foretold Ozai's hated reputation throughout history, gaining vengeance on his son for murdering him. Azulon never loved his second son, but he did love his grandchildren by him because he was so fond of Ursa – and plus, they were of his blood.

I think that Ozai's characterization worked extremely well in the show because the show didn't need Ozai to be anything other than a firebending Hitler. He was the perfect big bad. But now, I wanted to delve into his past, to explore how he became the monster he did, and I think that I did that kind of well, at least.

Honestly, I have always thought that it strange how Li and Lo were allowed access to Azula, tutoring her in the art of firebending when they themselves weren't even Firebenders, so I came up with the thought that they were Sozin's bastard daughters.

Also, was I the only one who thought that Fire Lord Sozin himself was strange, a surplus of paradoxical contradictions? From what we know, he had no siblings and was crowned Fire Lord in his twenties, while Avatar Roku was mastering the other elements, but Azulon, his heir, hadn't been born for another eighty years, during the very same year as the Air Nomads' genocide. The main job for a ruler, king or dictator or whatever, is to pass on the crown successfully to worthy heirs borne of their own body so that the dynastic succession is secure, but Sozin didn't do that, did he? He waited for literal decades to create his heir. So, I created the whole thing about how his first marriage resulted in only Lo and Li, failures in the eyes of virtually everyone, and no one else. But Sozin loved his Fire Lady and refused to put her aside. I kind of based the situation on King Richard II of England's. His queen, Anne of Bohemia, failed to get pregnant after almost twenty years of marriage, and she died childless from the plague in 1394. But for all of those years of marriage, all accounts show that Richard II never strayed from her and truly loved her based on multiple historical records that I've read, and he never sired any bastards.

**About Katara: eight years have passed since the show, and ever since, she's been in the Southern Water Tribe. She hasn't been forced to truly grapple with hard things like Zuko – and don't even get me started on Aang, who has to rebuild his entire people and deal with the realization that he is utterly alone. Katara hasn't had any growth really, she's pretty much the same character that she was in Canon, and let's be honest, she had quite a few faults. I intend for her to grow as a character and help her overcome certain shortcomings.
Also, since it was heavily implied that Katara watched her mother's murder, I highly doubt that she would like to think of the past, wishing to ignore the past, ignore her mistakes because that was the only way that she had been able to cope with her mother's death.

Yes, she and the rest of the Gaang did pretty much abandon Aang and Zuko because, honestly, based on the character development in Canon, and since they were *children* on top of that and thus very immature and not emotionally intelligent, it's something that could happen. Sokka and Katara were seriously considering leaving Aang to find their father with Bato, never even thinking about how that would potentially make Aang feel, and that kind of forced his hand to hide the letter. Suki honestly didn't know either of them and would easily follow Sokka wherever he went, because let's face it, they would probably become married after the Great War had ended – and in this story, that is exactly what happened. Toph was consistently shown to think of herself first and not others, and that's something that she will deal with in this story.

As for Aang and Katara dating, I honestly don't understand. Aang was a child and Katara was just as much one, too. Children don't know what they want, or who they want. The Kataang endgame is a fantasy-like conclusion, but that doesn't always happen in real life, and they, as their characterizations have dictated, don't mesh together. Aang, since he is eight years older now, no longer needs a mom, and that's who Katara is. And most importantly, they need to understand each other, and they can't do that. Their experiences are wholly different, and they honestly have nothing truly in common besides being a bender and fighting in the Great War. Although Katara lost her mom, she can't even understand how he feels about the Air Nomads' genocide and feeling truly alone. She still had her entire Tribe, her father before he had left to join the Great War, and her brother.

So, for me, that's why Azula, if a 'pairing' is needed for Aang, is the only logical conclusion. She was completely alone, too. Her father was a monster, her uncle had never shown her the care that he did for Zuko, and Zuko eventually left her after the Day of Black Sun, and most importantly, her mother left. At the end of the tv show, at least to me, it was a motif between Aang and Azula: they were both shown completely alone in multiple ways – physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

I will freely admit that an Aang and Katara story can work, it would be incredibly difficult, but if written correctly, it could work. I'm not confident that I could do that and frankly, I don't think it's logical and I don't necessarily like it.

I know that it might seem out of character to have Hakoda kind of forcing Katara to marry, but I think that it would make sense. For over eight years, Katara hasn't done her duty as the Chief's daughter to marry and create an alliance with someone. Based on historical context, just because Katara was able to change Pakku's mind, which was only because the elder Waterbender had a thing for Katara's grandmother, doesn't mean that she could change an entire culture. Look at the North, you didn't see any other girls training with Pakku when we know that there were plenty in the Healing Huts who would love to try what Katara was doing. For at least over a century, the Water Tribes have had those customs and that would be hard to reverse. I know that some of you think that Kanna would put a stop to that nonsensical traditions, but some of the Northern Tribe journeyed to the Southern. Most of them were probably men who sought a higher position of authority and thus, would outvote Kanna because the Water Tribes are a community and
communities are usually a majority. They would appeal to Hakoda as a man because he is the Chief and does have the final say, and Hakoda would eventually relent because it wouldn't be good for future negotiations if Hakoda shunned the new tribesmen.

About Katara 'submitting' to her father's order: she isn't being weak, but rather smart. She can choose out of any men on that list, some of the most powerful in the entire world, and if she doesn't comply, her father will marry her off to King Kuei without her permission. Nowadays, this would be completely unacceptable and I agree, but this show wasn't set in current times, but rather centuries ago, where women were often married without their permission. By no means am I condemning Hakoda to be a bastard father, but he's a Chief and he must make the tough calls and unfortunately, Katara will pay the price. As for Katara coming to the conclusion in her mind that she needs to convince Zuko to marry her, it's her being logical and realistic, somethings that are very new to her, so her plan is, indeed, a little far-fetched. First of all, she knows Zuko and that, above anything else, would trump whatever any other 'suitor' could offer her.

I hope you all enjoyed it! Please, leave a review and tell me what you thought of it!

Stay Safe
ButtonPusher
Chapter 5

Okay, it has been a long time since I had looked at the previous chapters because they had been written a while ago, and I was appalled at how poorly written they were. I have since edited things and added a few things that make the story flow better. If you want to go back and look at them, go ahead. I hope you all enjoy them and this chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Avatar the Last Airbender

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Aang felt better than he had in a long time, and it was more than a shock, in all honesty. He had been on Ember Island for almost three months and his only human company so far had been Azula of all people, and it was actually quite nice, a soothing relief to his battered heart.

They had settled into a routine together: he would always wake up from his place on her bedroom floor when the light of Agni rose, and while Azula would go out into the courtyard to train her katas, he would meditate, trying to restore peace to his chaotic soul, and he was slowly succeeding more with each passing day. Then, once they were both finished, they would share a meal of breakfast and go out into the town, blending in seamlessly with the crowds of Ember Island. While most of the time they went to the beach and destroyed opponents in volleyball or went to the town's daily-held festivals, there were rare times when they would attend a play performed by the Ember Island Players. Apparently, the first play that they had seen together, Love Amongst the Dragons, was the exact same play that Azula and Zuko had seen as children with their mother. On one special morning, Azula had taught him lightning generation, surprising him. After a moment of hesitation, he had eagerly listened to her, perfectly mirroring her movements, and within a single try, he had created lightning, firing the strike into the sky, the sound exploding through the air; he had been relieved, but he had been the only one, not failing to notice Azula's fleeting jealous expression.

Usually, after the rest of the morning had been thoroughly spent, they would both go eat at some of the food stands and relive the Great War by filling in the holes in the other's memory. One time, Aang had recalled to Azula how he and the rest of the Gaang had hidden at the Fire Lord's own home on Ember Island, the very same home that they themselves were staying at, at the twilight of the Great War thanks to her brother's suggestion after she had attacked them all at the Western Air Temple. Azula had shaken her head in disbelief, wondering aloud how she could have missed something so simple. She herself had then recounted her time in prison and how she and her mother had mostly reconciled, yet Azula had revealed quietly that a part of her heart was waiting for her mother to disappear from her life once again, finding time to say goodbye to Zuko but not to her.

Aang had then known that, while she and her mother had healed somewhat, progress was still needed to recreate the fierce bond between mother and daughter. To distract her from sorrowful thoughts about her mother, he had willingly told her stories of his life before the Great War had ever ravaged the world. She had been fascinated that he had stepped foot in the Fire Nation during Fire Lord Sozin's time and that he had had a firebending friend named Kuzon – "Ah! So, that's where you had gotten that name from," she had laughed in wonder. "I had been wondering because that's a rare upper nobility Fire Nation name." Then, because it had felt nice to reminisce about his past, Aang had shared how he and King Bumi of Omashu, when his friend hadn't been a King and had just been a boy who was a few years older than Aang, had ridden down the mail chutes in Omashu together.
Azula had laughed aloud at the end of his story, saying that technically they had already done that together, but he had shaken his head, citing that since she had been trying to capture him, it hadn't counted.

During those times of sharing stories, he had realized how much he had truly missed those times, especially when he had begun to share stories about Gyatso. While he had mourned and was still mourning, his people and culture, he realized that he had never mourned the time that had passed, the very memories that he had, and how he would never experience something like those again.

She had seemed to understand his deep grief somewhat for she had leaned forward, golden eyes serious. "I miss the happier times, too, you know?" She had said softly, staring up into his eyes, and Aang hadn't been able to look away, mesmerized by her. "But that's life, isn't it? It's an irrefutable truth: life is often crueler than it is fair. You lost your entire nation and everyone you ever knew except Appa and King Bumi, apparently, so I'm not going to insult you by pretending to understand what that feels like, but I am going to give you advice. The only way to honor those happier times is to create new happy-filled memories."

He had swallowed, feeling vulnerable, "I've already gotten started, then. Spending these past months with you have been… good."

Azula's eyes had widened but to his relief, she hadn't attacked him or tried to kill him, rather smirking. "Well, of course, it's good, Avatar. I brighten everyone's life up. Didn't you know that?"

That had eased the potential for an awkward and tense atmosphere, and Aang had been thankful, for both Azula's last words and her advice. Every memory that he had before his reveal of the Avatar had always been vivid, held in such esteem that he realized that he had begun to ignore the obvious shortcomings that he had experienced during his childhood.

Aang slowly realized that he was healing, and it was all because of Azula; he hoped that he could help her heal, as well.

Then, one day, when they had just returned to the house, Azula had abruptly and finally opened up to him about her past, sharing her story, placing a great trust in him that he silent swore never to betray.

"I was scared during my childhood," her golden eyes looked at him solemnly. "As a child of Royal Blood, expectations had to be met and great demands were placed on my shoulders. And, you see, if I ever failed in my duties, my father would beat me." Azula clenched her fists and Aang found himself filled with anger as she laughed almost brokenly, "That's what happened to Zuko, you know? Our father had thought that he was such a disgrace that he regularly whipped him on the back using fire." She swallowed, glimmers of the terrified girl from her childhood shining through, and Aang felt great compassion. "Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, I believe that the main reason father had always blatantly favored me over Zuko even though I was a girl, was that I was the second-born just like he was."

Aang nodded slowly, spacing his words delicately, "That does make sense, in a sickening way."

Azula continued after he had spoken, "As you know, my Uncle Iroh was the firstborn of my grandfather, Fire Lord Azulon, and he was beloved greatly by Azulon for he was groomed to eventually become the Fire Lord from the moment of his birth; it was always believed that my uncle would succeed my grandfather just as my grandfather succeeded Fire Lord Sozin after his death."

"Just as the Fire Nation has always worked," he commented, knowing it to be true. "It has been this way ever since there has been a Fire Lord and only those of Agni's chosen ruler's blood could
succeed the passed-on Fire Lord."

"Yes, and everyone, including my mother, had always thought that that was Iroh's destiny."

"But then your father was born,"

She smiled tightly, "Yes, but to understand, you must know some history about my family. My grandmother, Fire Lady Ilah was younger than Azulon by almost twenty years when they were married." An unamused laugh escaped her lips, "And it's ironic, you see, because there is also a twenty-year age difference between my uncle and my father."

Aang leaned back, "I had never known that the age difference was so profound,"

"Yes, so, when it was discovered that Fire Lady Ilah had fallen pregnant once again, carrying another child of Fire Lord Azulon's, my grandfather saw an opportunity: my father would be the blade in the dark to my uncle's grandiose light. As you know, every flame casts a shadow, and Iroh's flame was so large."

He wondered if every generation of the Fire Royal Family was so dark and disturbed, "So your grandfather, Fire Lord Azulon intended for your father to be Iroh's shadow." He concluded softly, "I can see that, though. Iroh is such a kind soul, a burdened one, but a good soul and heart, nonetheless."

"He wasn't always that way, Aang," her eyes stared into his own."

"What?" He asked in shock, knowing that Iroh had some murky spots in his past, but didn't everyone? "I know that he had once laid siege to Ba Sing Se, but surely that was it, wasn't it?"

"People change – I think that we are both perfect examples of that," she then sighed and tried to smile at him, but it lacked her usual energy and charm. "As you know, my uncle was the Dragon of the West, the single man who had terrorized the entire Earth Kingdom for a decade, his very name whispered in fear by the Kings of the Earth Kingdom. He was fierce as fire and his tempers rivaled my grandfather's, the legends say. For over ten years, he was the perfect heir to Sozin's legacy, and he and my grandfather desired to end the Earth Kingdom's resiliency, planning to conquer Ba Sing Se. For six-hundred days, he had been unwavering in his pursuit to achieve glory for the Fire Nation, to make his dead grandfather, Fire Lord Sozin, proud, and he even managed to break through the Outer Wall, the first time that someone had ever accomplished such a feat in the history of the world." To his surprise, her eyes were clouded with sadness. "But, to everyone’s horror, my cousin was caught in the crossfire. I don't know he died, nobody does except my uncle himself - and probably my grandfather did, too - but my uncle has never shared details, only saying that it was a father's pride that killed his only son, Lu Ten."

"Your uncle blames himself," he said softly, recognizing it easily for he himself did the same thing concerning the Air Nomads' genocide.

"Yes, so do you see? It wasn't until Lu Ten was killed when he finally saw the 'light', so to speak. He abandoned the siege when the Fire Nation was closer than ever before to conquering Ba Sing Se and he was declared a milquetoast in the words of the Noble Houses and a spineless fool by myself." Azula closed her eyes. "Before my cousin's death, my uncle was a lot different and I already spoke of it somewhat. I've heard the stories, the legends whispered by the servants and the Noble Houses. He was crueler and was feared throughout the other nations, not just the Earth Kingdom, but even the Water Tribes. He had searched for years for the missing Avatar just as Azulon and Sozin had done, and he had once even declared publicly that when he found the Avatar, he would gut him like a baby Dragon, but not kill him, leaving him alive so that the Avatar wouldn't become reborn, but just barely, on the brink of life itself."
Aang felt chills crawl up his spine at her words, nausea blossoming in his stomach, "I never knew."

Azula smiled sadly at him, "He's a lot different now, isn't he? Compared to the monster he once was, the differences are as clear as night and day. He was still nothing compared to what my father became, though. But, because of his conquests through the Earth Kingdom and his hunting for the Avatar, my uncle was never around for Ozai's childhood, causing repercussions which would echo through history. Throughout all my father's childhood, from what I've been able to piece together, he strove to earn his father's love and his brother's admiration but received neither in spite of his greatest attempts."

"How come? Why would your grandfather and uncle never love an innocent baby? That doesn't make sense."

Azula chuckled, "When Ozai was born, Fire Lady Ilah, my grandmother died during the birth," she paused and whispered, "I wouldn't be surprised at all if Azulon always resented Ozai because of that, and that was directly the reason for why my father never received the yearned-for love that he had sought from his father. It also surely didn't help that Ozai had no skill at all with his bending."

Aang was flabbergasted, "What? Are you kidding? I faced him during Sozin's Comet, remember? And I can safely say that very few Firebenders in the history of the world have reached the height of power that your father did – he rivaled Sozin and Azulon themselves, if not surpassed them!"

Her face was colored with amusement and she laughed softly, "My father had to work for his power, just like Zuzu did, because, from what I've gathered and seen with my own eyes, my father and brother were both late bloomers in regard to firebending. Whereas, uncle and I – and my mother, too – were all prodigies, declared such by the Fire Sages, and my uncle was, specifically, always praised by Fire Lord Azulon, songs of admiration being written daily for my uncle's prowess in firebending."

"Wait, was Fire Lady Ilah a prodigy, then? I know that Fire Lord Azulon was,"

"I don't know, actually, but I would assume so, yes. Azulon's eye would never have been caught otherwise, but I don't truly know because she died bringing my monstrous father into this world." Her golden eyes had wisps of amusement colored within all of a sudden. "It actually runs in the family, the mother dying in childbirth. Did you know, Aang?"

His eyebrows furrowed, "I remember when I was a young boy, over a century ago, hearing stories and legends about Sozin's own grandfather having problems siring a healthy male heir. Was that because his wife – or wives – died in childbirth?"

"I don't know, honestly. but I do know that my uncle's wife died during childbirth, and mother herself narrowly triumphed over death's seeking hands while giving birth to Zuzu. She had no complications with me, though," she then said with more than a touch of pride.

Aang looked at her with wide eyes for Zuko had never mentioned any of what Azula was sharing with him, but honestly, that wasn't surprising, especially considering how sensitive his friend was with his own past; it had taken a long time for his friend to reveal to Aang the story behind his scar, and the results had almost been catastrophic when it was shared – Aang had become blinded with overwhelming rage and had almost destroyed the entire Caldera, and then, if he hadn't managed to calm down from his fury, he knew that he would have razed the entire Fire Nation to nothing but ash.

"My uncle never seemed to care for my father when he was younger, and those effects still haunt
this world. When my father was finally grown, Uncle Iroh took an interest in him and his family, but by then it was too late," she breathed out. "The path had been set."

"The winds of fate had deemed it so," he intoned quietly.

"Ever since I can remember, my father had paid special attention to me. I suspect that since Zuzu reminded him so much of his younger self, he loathed his heir, his firstborn son, and he had decided to groom me to be like him. But, to be honest, I was nothing like him," she admitted. "Yet, that had never stopped him. In fact, I think that I was always what he wanted to be: a prodigy, intelligent, and a controlled temper. I will admit that I do have his ambition, but the rest is from mother, who was the cleverest of everyone and always finding a solution when no one else could because she was so cunning."

He closed his eyes, "And Zuko was his father reborn," the words floated in the air.

"Yes, Zuzu was just like our father in so many ways. He had his temper and bitterness, and he seemed curse just as our father was. Zuzu had always strived for his father's love just like Ozai had strived for Azulon's, but like history had declared, neither received the love they had so desperately yearned for." Azula sighed quietly and brought her hand to rub her face.

"What about your school?" Aang asked, trying to slightly change the subject. "What was it like? I heard Zuko once mention something about it – the Academy, I think it was."

Azula laughed quietly and stared at him, "I was placed in the Fire Royal Academy when I bent my first flame, and it's where I had first met..." she paused, and her fingers curled into white-knuckled fists, jaw clenched in anger. "Mai and Ty Lee," she almost spat out, golden eyes finally showing her anger.

Aang looked at her sympathetically, with large amounts of compassion. Although the Gaang had never betrayed him in the same way that Mai and Ty Lee had betrayed her, the Gaang had abandoned him. He understood what those dark emotions felt like, the feeling of powerlessness that contained the capacity to turn good people cruel.

He had been so young - too young, in all honesty - during the Great War that the idea of truly being alone had never resonated within him. He had naïvely refused to contemplate the future of his life and how the Air Nomads would return, and how he would be able to even accomplish it while he had been mastering the elements. Then, once he had ended the Great War, the Gaang had all went their separate ways, and that was when, as if for the first time when he had discovered Gyatso's skeleton, Aang had realized that he was completely alone and that nobody could ever be as alienated and isolated as he himself was. Years passed, and it had only been Zuko who had stayed in contact with him, while the others hadn't ever written him, had forgotten about him, disposed of him as soon as he had ended the Great War and saved the world.
Eventually, his heart became wounded by their seeming rejection of him, and then it had morphed into mind-numbing bitterness. Then, one day, it had all changed for a tide swallowed all of those feelings and changed them, adding drops of darkness to them, until he finally became enraged, anger fully-rooted in his mind.

Azula interrupted his thoughts, "I had never had a friend before in my life. The only people who I had known then were just Zuzu, mother, father, uncle, Lu Ten, and grandfather. I had yearned for a steady presence in my life that wasn't any of them, so I approached them, not having high hopes for my endeavor, yet, against all of the odds, I actually liked them." She shook her head in disbelief, golden eyes flashing with memories and anger. "Mai had been so dreary, so boring, but I had found her fascinating, especially since she was high-class and of one of the Noble Houses, yet in spite of all of that, she had been emotionless – a paradox! And it had been a refreshing change of pace." Azula closed her eyes, "Ty Lee had, I will admit, taken a lot longer to get used
to. She was so exuberant, and since I had never encountered someone like her before, I found her ceaseless enthusiasm grating. But, eventually, I then grew to tolerate her presence and I had even grown to like her as well." She snarled, blue flames snapping across her fingers, a deadly omen.

Since he knew that she was beginning to get worked up, he stood up and grabbed one of the books off of one of the shelves to his right.

"And what in Agni's name do you think that you are doing?" She had hissed, eyes flashing with a promise of death.

He knew that he shouldn't have interrupted her, but he also knew that if he hadn't, she would have been lost in a haze of hatred. "Here," he tossed her the book and she easily caught it. "I want you to tear the book apart, and while doing so, think about all of your rage and hate, the terrible memories that lurk in every recess of your mind. And most importantly, you will not bend."

Azula stared at him, jaw clenched, blue flames still hovering in her hands. "You have great gall, Avatar," she hissed. "There is no way that I am doing something so asinine! No, fuck you, Avatar, and your foolish words."

Aang sighed and stared back at her furious face solemnly, "Do you trust me, Azula?" He asked quietly, "Are you willing to allow the healing process to begin? Trust me, please, okay?"

Her face was frozen as he stared down at her, watching as her wide eyes observed his own features. Then, after several seconds, she wet her lips, blue flames sputtering to their death. "I trust you, Aang,"

Sighing inwardly with intense relief, he then smiled encouragingly at her, "Thank you, Azula, I don't ever intend to break that trust, okay? Will you at least try my suggestion?"

Her golden eyes were critical, "This is ridiculous," she muttered and yanked the book out of his hands, beginning the process. He watched quietly as she ripped through the first page and then the second, features becoming more pinched with rage with each page torn through. And halfway through the book, Azula's face was twisted in a menacing snarl, lips curled back in a feral display of savagery as she used extreme force to tear through a single page.

She was finally letting it all go.

Aang continued to observe, not saying and hardly breathing. He didn't know what she was thinking about, but he had a pretty good idea as minutes passed, and Azula's face was covered with a sheen of sweat, panting like an animal, shreds of paper covering her legs and feet as she ripped through every last page. When she finally finished, her eyes were wide, comprehension beginning to shine within instead of animalistic intensity. "What was that?" She breathed out, fingers ghosting through the scraps of paper littered all around her.

Aang nodded towards the heap of paper on the floor and on her legs, of what was a former book. "It was a healthy way for you to release your anger."

Azula continued to stare at him, "I feel different, like something has been re-aligned," she admitted.

He smiled gently, but not with pity, understanding instead shining in his gray orbs, "That's good, so very good, Azula. Your anger has been simmering for years, taking up so much of your mental energy as it has been aggressively and violently growing. You have never been able to be free of it, instead choosing to ignore your feelings and 'stuff' them down, damaging your psyche and ultimately, it's why your mind broke. Now that you have taken these first steps, you can hopefully
be free and become who you were always meant to be."

Her eyes looked suspiciously misty, but Aang wasn't certain. She inhaled slowly, fingers flicking off some of the scraps of paper from her legs. "Shall I finish my story, then?"

Aang smiled softly, "If you want to. It's your story, not mine so you can choose what you want to do."

Azula observed him before she then suddenly smirked, "It's a pretty long tale, Avatar."

"We've got plenty of time," he gestured around. "I wouldn't rather be anywhere else, I swear,"

"You're quite a charmer, aren't you?" She hummed, a smile gracing her lips, "So, where was I?" She pondered, "Oh, yes, when I was at the Academy. After I had finished..."

They had stayed up the entire night, the past shared and fully disclosed, no barriers between them, at least for her. Aang had to admit that he wouldn't be so easy to trust her with such intimate knowledge about himself and his past, and whenever he thought of sharing more with her, the scar on his back pinched in warning. So, while he had begun to trust her more than pretty much anyone, shocking considering their shared history of violence, except Zuko, he wasn't about to forget the past either, and he was hesitant to.

He did know that Azula had a hard and arduous childhood, and now, Aang truly hoped that she would be able to find true peace, something that had alluded her so far with the ease of a Master Airbender. Then, over the next week, they had become even closer and Aang found that he was truly enjoying her presence – and it was dreadful to envision a time when she would no longer be in his life. If anyone would have told him, even a year ago, that he would look forward to spending time with Azula of all people, he would have called them crazy, but the winds of fate work in mysterious ways.

Now, sitting down for his morning meditation, he decided that, after much time of putting the task off, he would finally take the time to summon Avatar Anil forward.

"Avatar Aang," the Airbender before him seemed full of life and the very antithesis of Avatar Yangchen.

"Avatar Anil," he nodded his head in greeting. "I have spoken with many of your successors and have gotten nowhere, so I come to you at last. Avatar Boruk suggested that you might be knowledgeable about this matter."

"And what matter is that, Avatar Aang?" Anil questioned, arrow tattoos a soothing sight to his wounded heart. He had never known if he would see another set of airbending tattoos save for Yangchen.

Aang held up the scroll for his fellow Airbender. "This scroll,"

His predecessor from thousands of years ago looked at it blankly. "And what scroll is that? I've never seen it."

He was quite taken aback for he had thought that Anil would know, "It's an airbending scroll that contains details on how an Airbender can achieve true flight without the need for a glider."

Anil raised a brow in curiosity, "I have never heard of that ability before."

"So, you never mastered the ability, then," he concluded sadly. "Boruk had mentioned that in Avatar Keska's time, your successor, she had killed an unnamed Airbender who had managed to
unlock the secret to weightlessness, the art of true flight, untethering himself from the Earth."

"Why are you so curious, Avatar Aang? And matter of fact, I had never known that the ability existed." A look of almost envy crossed his features. "I wish that I had known, so that I could have mastered it."

"I'm trying to find which of my predecessors mastered the ability," he almost snapped, but immediately recognizing that yelling at Avatar Anil wouldn't bode well for either of them. "Years ago, when I was in the Avatar State, I had utilized someone's knowledge and power over true flight, but I have yet to find who. I had thought that you would know."

"Why?"

Aang finally rolled the scroll back up, "Because Avatar Boruk had heard legends of the ability, and I figured that the unnamed Airbender would have heard of them in Avatar Keska's time because of your reign as Avatar; maybe legends of your mastery of such an ability had spread like fire itself."

Anil then frowned, "I'm sorry to be of no help to you, young Avatar. I truly wish that I knew the answer to your problem, but I do not."

"Well, should I go back further, then?" He asked incredulously. "I've already gone back eight Avatars, two full cycles, which is two-thousand years!"

Anil nodded slowly and carefully, eyes narrowed. "I do believe that something dark is at the root of this problem, Avatar Aang. Going back further would be the best way to find these roots." He dispersed and rushed back into Aang's body.

He sighed and wearily rubbed his forehead, knowing that something was 'off' with the entire situation, but knowing what it was; he needed to solve it! With determination gnawing at his heart, he closed his eyes and looked deep into his soul, and just as he was about to call forth one of his predecessors, he was interrupted by Azula, who had just walked in.

"Talking to yourself again?" She smirked, lips curled.

Aang opened his lids only to roll his eyes up at her smiling face, "We've already talked about this, Azula."

Azula dismissed him with her hand, waving him off. "Please, Aang, I'm just teasing you. So, lighten up, Avatar," she stared at him then for several moments, golden eyes becoming serious. "And let me guess, whoever you have just spoken to didn't know anything about your problem."

Aang stared at her with wide eyes, shocked at her intelligence, not really understanding why he continued to be surprised by her. He had never told her of the airbending scroll and the subsequent problems that arose from its discovery. And yet, she had somehow known that something had been bothering him, that an Avatar problem had weighed down his mind. It seemed that Azula was still as observant as she had been when she was hunting him across the world all of those years ago during the Great War.

"No, they didn't," he closed his eyes. "Nobody does! I've traveled back to predecessors who haven't existed for over two thousand years, and yet, I'm still nowhere!"

"What is the problem?" She asked curiously after a moment.

Instead of answering verbally, he abruptly tossed her the scroll and she effortlessly caught it, eyebrows raised. She unfurled the parchment, the crinkling sound echoing, and read the
"Let go of the misconceptions that plague you. Enter the void and become the wind." Her eyes widened slightly with surprise and she looked at him, excitement almost shining in her golden eyes.

"Why don't you fly around then?" She asked incredulously, voice rising. "You clearly have the knowledge on how to do so."

"I found it at the Southern Air Temple a few months ago." Aang sighed, "I had never heard of this ability before, and any of the Avatars who I have spoken with have either only heard myths that they hadn't believed, or they hadn't heard of the ability at all."

"Is that how you floated in… Ba Sing Se?" She questioned after a moment, and her face pinched in guilt at her words.

He looked at her pointedly, "I forgave you for that, Azula, and to answer your question, yes. I am certain that's how I was able to float in Ba Sing Se."

"So, one of your past lives could do this," she concluded and held up the scroll. "And that's the problem, isn't it? You want to learn it, but you need a teacher. You need to discover who of your numerous past lives mastered this... 'become the wind' ability."

Aang nodded and had an idea. "Since you were able to communicate with Avatar Boruk, would you like to stay with me while I summon another of my predecessors?" He asked curiously and a little hope-filled.

Azula's eyes lit up and she smirked down at him, a pleased expression on her face. "Does the Avatar himself, the most powerful man in the whole world, need my help?" She said innocently.

"I don't need it, but I would appreciate it," he corrected. "You're a set of fresh eyes who can perhaps look at this from a different angle than I have been doing."

Azula sat down next to him, "Very well, I'm quite curious to speak with another version of you."

He breathed deeply after smiling at her briefly and closed his eyes, delving deep into his soul, focusing intently and unwaveringly. He passed Anil's presence and looked further, already having decided to travel to four Avatar Cycles before Anil was born, to speak with the Air Nomad Avatar from around eight-thousand years ago.

He journeyed deeper and deeper, surpassing over a dozen Avatars, feeling the passion of Fire, the resiliency of the Earth, and the adaptability of Water. He hesitated as he hovered over the Water Avatar, a feeling fluttering through his mind. He had decided to speak with the Air Avatar, but a strange sensation desired for him to speak with the Water Avatar. Determining that he should honor his instincts, he summoned the Avatar borne of Water.

"Avatar Aang, I greet you and your lovely companion, the Princess Azula. It has been many millennia since I've been summoned forth. My name is Avatar Kirku," the man who had just appeared before both he and Azula looked very similar to Piandao. He had the same type of posture and look to him, but his eyes were blue as water.

"Avatar Kirku," he nodded his head in greeting, seeing Azula hastily do the same after overcoming her shock that one of Aang's past lives knew who she was. "I was going to speak with your predecessor, but something told me that I should speak with you. My Earthbender is shining through, so I will be blunt: why?"

Kirku smiled at him, amusement flashing through his water-colored eyes. "Because I can actually help you, Avatar Aang. I know the truth that you so desperately seek, and the answers to the
"questions that you don't know that you need to ask."

His eyes widened, "That's excellent," he glanced at Azula, who was staring at Avatar Kirku's ethereal body in awe. "You need to reveal it, then. And what are these questions that I need to ask? And the answers, I suppose?"

"To understand what I will reveal to you, you must first know the history of who we really are." Kirku stared at him intently.

"And what exactly are you talking about, Avatar Kirku?" Aang demanded, dimly noticing that Azula finally overcame her awe and frowned at Kirku's words. "I know who I am: the Avatar, Master of the Four Elements, and the Balance-Keeper, the World Spirit in human form, a god masquerading as a mortal."

"There is no such thing as the World Spirit, Avatar Aang," his past life began. "That title was a facade created by the Earth Kingdom whilst my successor was growing up; they wanted to persuade the young Avatar into believing that she should only serve the Earth Kingdom since the World Spirit implies that the Earth Spirit is actually the Avatar. Sadly, this falsified title has since grown in popularity and the real truth has been lost to the ages."

Aang stared at his past life in bafflement, "So, are you saying that everything that I've ever been taught has been a lie all along?" He demanded in disbelief, wondering how Kirku could believe that any of his words made sense.

Azula finally spoke up and she mirrored Aang's own thoughts. "This doesn't make any sense, Avatar Kirku. Surely you must understand that we cannot accept these... falsehoods as the truth."

Instead of looking discouraged as Aang had thought he would, Kirku smiled gently at both of them, "It will soon make sense, Avatar Aang and Princess Azula, once you actually listen to what I am telling you. You must let me explain."

"Very well," he motioned forward. "I would like to hear your explanations, Avatar Kirku,"

"And I would, as well," Azula pointed out.

Kirku nodded his head in consent, "Thank you, both of you. You both must understand that the Four Nations used to be different. During my reign as Avatar, there was no Fire Lord and the Water Tribes had not been located at the Poles until the twilight of my life. The Air Nomads, your people, Avatar Aang, were just beginning their process of seclusion and enlightenment while the Earth Kingdom was just starting to become more assertive and stubborn in their beliefs."

"So, the Four Nations have each evolved over time?" Azula concluded without hesitation, and Aang admired her for it.

"Yes, Princess Azula," Kirku nodded and turned to stare directly at Aang with an intensity to rival Avatar Kyoshi, "Do you, Avatar Aang, know anything about who the first Avatar was?" Aang briefly saw Azula raise her eyebrows at the question, curiosity carved into her features.

He shook his head quickly, "No, no, not at all. I don't even know his or her name, Avatar Kirku. I never saw a reason to journey that deep into the Avatar Cycle."

Kirku sighed but looked excited by such the chance to reveal a seeming forgotten history, "Avatar Wan was the first of us all, Avatar Aang, the very first Balance-Keeper, and it was he who laid the foundations for our very existence. If you wish to understand his ascension, you must know the reasoning behind it."
Aang was about to speak, but Azula beat him to it. "You said ascension. Why? Are you implying that Wan was just a regular, mortal human before he became the Avatar, then?"

His past life smiled at her, "Yes, he was, Princess Azula. You are quite bright, you know? In my time, you might have been the smartest person in the world behind myself."

He almost laughed at the curious mixture of pride and the sheer offended look on her face. "I'm not sure how to react to that," she said after a moment.

Kirku ignored her words, continuing with his story about the first Avatar. "When he had just been a regular human, Wan was a troublemaker, always willing to thwart anyone. And eventually, because of his willingness to attract and deal out trouble, Wan was exiled from his home and sent to the Spirit Wilds."

"And where is that?" He questioned, never recalling any place with such a name.

"It's in the Spirit World, Avatar Aang," he inhaled slowly and continued, "Back in Wan's time, the Spirit World could be reached by anyone."

Azula's eyes widened, "How is that possible?" She exclaimed, looking truly shocked and Aang himself was a little better. He had never known. "Only the Avatar can freely enter the Spirit World! Everyone has always been taught that only the Avatar possesses such power. My uncle has been rumored to have visited the Spirit World, but I personally believe his grief had caused him to have hallucinations."

"Okay," he cut through Azula's praise of the Avatar's power and Iroh's potential visit to the Spirit World. "How were people then able to enter the Spirit World? It is incredibly difficult, and I say this with the knowledge that I'm a prodigy – the first time was arduous for me."

"There were two separate Portals that bridged the two worlds together, the Material Realm and the Spiritual Realm." Kirku explained, "In spite of his exile from his home, Wan was curious about the Spirit World and with zeal, traveled through the Portal into the Spirit Realm. While he was there, he slowly made friends with the spirits and was eventually accepted and trusted by them. Then, after he had decided to explore more of both of the Realms, he ran into Raava and Vaatu."

Aang recognized the names intimately but he had no idea who they were, and it dawned on him that he should know them. "Who are they, Avatar Kirku?" He leaned forward almost eager for the answer, and while Azula was much reserved, her golden eyes were keen for knowledge.

"Raava and Vaatu are the mighty spirits of Light and Darkness," Kirku stared at them both intently.

"And why are they so important, then?" Azula asked, "They sound generic, in all honesty,"

"They were the two who created the Mortal Realm," his past life stated seriously. "From what I know, together, they shaped its very formation."

After overcoming his shock, Aang nodded his head, "So they were incredibly powerful, then," he concluded. "Yet, how come I, as Aang, have never heard of them?" He was certain that in his past lives he had known those names, but he had never known them before Kirku had just revealed them to him.

"You'll see, Avatar Aang, you'll see, I promise. Raava and Vaatu are the most powerful of the spirits, the ancient cosmic forces of Light and Darkness, forever supposed to be merged in harmony with one another, physical bodies tethered to each other. And with their combined
"power, they created this world and then the Lion Turtles, who then created humans and the spirit, Koh gave these humans their faces." Kirku paused again and before he could speak again, the void of silence was pierced.

"The Face Stealer was who gifted humans their faces?" He raised his eyebrows, "If that is actually true—"

"And I can guarantee you that it is, Avatar Aang,"

"- then the humans must have then done something which brought great insult on Koh. Now, he steals the faces he gifted them."

Kirku's eyebrows furrowed, "That makes sense, but I don't know why the Face Stealer would feel the need to listen to mortals. They tend to be petty and arrogant, delusions of self-grandeur evident. Koh is far too powerful to listen to their words."

Aang nodded his head, "And that wouldn't explain why he stole Ummi's face." With that said, he could feel the burning vengeance in his soul as Avatar Kuruk stirred, and within moments, Kirku's ethereal form flickered like a dying candle. His eyes widened as he realized that Kuruk was attempting to appear in Kirku's place, but he swiftly put a stop to that, sending Kuruk back into the fathomless abyss in his soul.

"Thank you, Avatar Aang," his past life said, water-colored eyes surprised. "I wouldn't have been able to fend him off. He is powerful and the rage in his heart burns brighter than Agni himself."

"And who are you talking about?" Azula demanded, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I know it's a past life of yours, Aang, but I doubt that Avatar Kyoshi or Avatar Roku had such rage."

He turned towards her, "We are speaking about Avatar Kuruk, Azula, the predecessor of Avatar Kyoshi."

"The Water Avatar?" She clarified, "I think that I've heard legends of him."

"And you would have, I'm sure," he nodded his head in consideration. "Kuruk lived a long time and I do know that he was egotistical, probably siring many bastards in his life. It wouldn't surprise me if most of the Water Tribes nowadays, both North and South, are borne of his line."

She nodded, "He sounds like the antithesis of you, Aang." She smiled at him slightly and looked at Avatar Kirku, "So how did humans gain the ability to bend, Avatar Kirku? I would like to know that." Azula questioned curiously, her golden eyes gleaming with the lust for more knowledge.

"The Lion Turtles were Energybenders." Kirku laughed as Aang’s expression twisted with disbelief and shock. "Yes, I know what that is, Avatar Aang. From what I do know, the Lion Turtles used energybending to gift humans with bending. Eventually, humans learned they had to think and behave like their element and that is how the bending arts were created."

Aang felt like he had heard this story before, and he realized that it was probably when Kirku's predecessor told Kirku himself the story, but it was still a lot to process. "So, what happened with Wan, then?"

Kirku sobered, "We must go back further for you to comprehend the magnitude of what Wan had accomplished," his eyes became hazy-looking and his voice became raspy, almost a hiss. "Ten-thousand years before Wan was even born, Vaatu had managed to untether himself from Raava and then had broken through the divide that separated the Plane of Spirits from the Material World. About every spirit, whether good or dark, followed Vaatu and invaded the Mortal Realm
with him, terrorizing the early humans. When the mortals became nearly-extinct, they sought desperate measures to ensure their survival against the calamity, and eventually, they were forced to climb on top of the Lion Turtles for their protection, having found their ensured-survival. After witnessing the chaos and darkness unleashed over the Material and Spiritual Worlds, Raava eventually managed to tether both she and Vaatu back together once more to prevent further damage to both of the Realms. But because they had become fastened back together in the Mortal Realm, they were stuck there, unable to journey into the Spirit World, partly in fear that Vaatu would manage to corrupt a horde of spirits to attack Raava and free him. For thousands of lifetimes, they had stayed trapped in your Realm, forever amalgamated, but then Wan, one day, had stumbled upon them. Vaatu had then seen an opportunity as this human, who he didn't know the identity of nor of his destiny, had fallen into a pit that he had no knowledge of. No other spirits, even the Elementals and the Face Stealer themselves, dared to approach Raava and Vaatu's forever-fighting forms. But Wan didn't know that those who communicated with Vaatu became slowly tainted with the darkness – and it was why Raava had taken such great lengths to keep them tethered to one another. And knowing this, Vaatu subtly managed to trick the gullible Wan into freeing him from Raava's grip."

"And how could a regular human free such a powerful spirit, the ancient cosmic force of Darkness? And for that matter, how could Wan best Raava, the Light Spirit? She wouldn't have let Vaatu go without a fight." Azula stated incredulously.

"Wan bent fire at Raava, who had become so caught off-guard by the sheer shock and audacity of the mortal, wasn't able to defend herself, and Vaatu became unfastened from Raava because of Wan's thought-to-be gallant deeds," Kirku said plainly.

After overcoming his shock, he sputtered, "But you cannot bend in the Spirit World! Believe me, I've tried on multiple occasions." Aang's voice cut through Kirku, his ethereal form wavering for a moment.

"Remember, Aang, they weren't in the Spirit World at that point. Raava and Vaatu's physical bodies were in the Mortal's Realm. And, actually, you can bend in the Spirit World, Avatar Aang. If anyone, no matter the bender, travels through the Spirit Portals, they will retain their bending abilities because their physical body will be in the Spirit World, not just their spirit." Kirku explained calmly.

Aang sobered as his past life's reasoning did make quite a bit of sense. "So, that was when Wan realized his destiny as the Avatar and stopped Vaatu?" He trailed off at the end, shaking his head. "No, that doesn't make sense, though. You said yourself that Wan was a regular human – a Firebender, at that. So how did he become the Master of the Four Elements, then?"

Kirku smiled, "You are finally asking the questions that you had had no knowledge to ask, Avatar Aang."

"Raava and Vaatu are important to this, aren't they?" Azula asked rhetorically, "And since the Avatar didn't allow the Great War to continue to molest the world, I would say that the Spirit of Light… became human and thus, the Avatar. Is that right?"

"You are close, Princess Azula, very close. You are right, though, about Raava, just not about her becoming a human."

Aang stared at the arrow tattoos on his hands, "Wan was the first Avatar and since Raava- "

Azula's eyes gleamed, "Raava bonded herself with Wan, then!" She concluded, looking quite pleased with herself. "So, after Wan had unleashed Vaatu, that was when Raava and Wan bonded, creating the Avatar?"
Kirku shook his head, "No, Raava was furious with Wan and attempted to inveigle Vaatu once more, fastening him to her, but it didn't work; Vaatu was gaining power by the second as Darkness itself spread through both Realms. Seeing no other choice, and with her power diminishing because of Vaatu's growing strength, Raava eventually had the Lion Turtles gift Wan with the other elements..." Kirku was then interrupted.

"Answer me this, Avatar Kirku: what element did Wan first obtain? It was fire because you said that he had bent fire at Raava, thus untethering Darkness itself, right?" Azula asked with a gleam in her eye.

"Yes, Princess Azula, it was fire." Kirku raised a brow at Azula.

She turned to Aang, a smirk carved into her features, golden eyes burning in the light with delight. "Firebenders truly are superior! Wouldn't that prove it, if nothing else, Aang?"

He rolled his eyes at her conclusion and elected to ignore her question, turning to Kirku. "Continue, please," he gestured.

Kirku eyed Azula in interest but returned to the story. "Wan was a Firebender first and foremost, and no human could ever hope to hold more than a single element; the power would consume them, destroying their souls, never to reach the Gardens of the Dead. So, knowing this, Raava joined with Wan briefly so that he could receive each of the elements, and then she would just as quickly leave."

"Why only briefly?" Aang asked, "I thought that Wan and Raava, when bonded, became the Avatar."

"If she had prolonged their bond, she would end up killing him."

"Then how did the Avatar come to exist, then?" He demanded.

His past life had a small smile across his lips, "You'll see, I promise, Avatar Aang. So, since Raava was who received the elements, Wan wouldn't die. And when they briefly joined together, he could bend all of the elements."

"So, he would defeat Vaatu as the Avatar, then," he concluded. "I've wondered about that."

"You make it sound far easier than it actually was, Avatar Aang,"

"Why?"

"You see, Vaatu knew that the only being who could ever contain him, and thus overpower him, was Raava herself. In truth, he was wary of her and the potential downfall that her presence brought him. He knew that there would only be one way to ensure that he could reign over both Realms: the Harmonic Convergence."

Azula rolled her eyes, "And now would be when you explain to both Aang and me what the Harmonic Convergence actually is, Avatar Kirku. To me, right now, it means absolutely nothing."

Kirku laughed, the sound sudden and almost tranquil. "Yes, of course, you are right, Princess Azula."

"Just as I always am," she smirked.

"The Harmonic Convergence is a supernatural phenomenon that only occurs every ten-thousand years and the fate of both Realms is determined on that day. During the Harmonic Convergence,
the stars themselves all align perfect, and because of this, spiritual energy is vastly amplified to levels you can't even fathom, Princess Azula. Because of the influx of such sums of spiritual energy, the Spirit Portals merge, and all spirits become stronger. Since the beginning of time, when they had created the Realms, Raava and Vaatu battled during the Harmonic Converge, determining the outcome of both Realms for the next ten thousand years."

Aang closed his eyes as he understood, "Wan must face Vaatu during such a battle, then."

"Yes, and to show you that the winds of fate are fickle, Wan only had a little over a year to train with the elements, similar to you, Avatar Aang."

"I empathize with his plight, Avatar Kirku, I truly do," he said. "It's a burden I wish on no one except Ozai himself."

Azula smiled at him, "And I can guarantee you that my father would break under the pressure, unlike you. You are far stronger than my father, always have been."

He placed a hand on her shoulder, "And you are stronger than him, too," he whispered.

"You are such a sweet-talker," she murmured.

Realizing that they were about to journey into potentially deadly territory, he turned back to Kirku. "So, Wan had a year to train with the elements before the Harmonic Convergence arrived."

"Yes, Avatar Aang, a little more than a year, and Wan and Raava became friends during that time. And in time, Raava realized that she had been wrong about Wan and that he was a worthy man. But when the Harmonic Convergence was about to begin, Wan faced Vaatu, prepared to accept his destiny, but he was beaten around easily, Vaatu merely toying with the mortal. It wasn't until when Raava briefly bonded herself in Wan's body that damage was dealt to Vaatu, but it wasn't enough, nowhere near enough." Kirku's voice was chilling and raspy, ancient as his words painted a story of a man who, even though he had given everything that he had, wasn't strong enough.

"And what happened after?" He leaned forward, dimly realizing that Azula had copied his movement.

"When the Harmonic Convergence had finally begun, and after having been smacked around by an amused Vaatu, Wan then placed his hand to the untold amount of raw energy pouring out of the merged-Portals. This act changed the course of history, both in the Material Realm and the Spiritual Realm. The energy flooded Wan's body and it changed him, vaulting him towards his position as the most powerful of everyone; it also fully bonded Wan and Raava forever, thus creating the Avatar Spirit. Wan was then able to defeat Vaatu and he imprisoned the malevolent spirit in the Tree of Time, which is the center of the Spirit World, and some even whisper that the Tree of Time was the very first spirit, the Time-Keeper itself. And after the Harmonic Convergence, Avatar Wan convinced the spirits to return to their world, and he closed the two Portals, forever separating humans and spirits." Kirku finished.

Aang leaned back in contemplation of everything that Kirku had just said, the words floating in the air, echoing in his ears. For several minutes, nobody spoke a word, each ruminating fiercely, and throughout it all, Avatar Kirku remained ever-present.

After several long moments, he raised his gaze to Kirku's, "So why are you telling us this, Avatar Kirku? When I summoned you, this isn't what I had had in mind, you know?"

Kirku eyes were sorrowful. "Vaatu has escaped his prison," the solemn words floated in the air of
the home on Ember Island, and Aang almost staggered, needing to brace his hand on the floor. A physical and gruesome revulsion echoed in his heart and he suddenly felt it, the tangible taste of fear in his mouth; he instinctively knew that he had just experienced Avatar Wan's response to the news.

"How?" Azula questioned while Aang was still speechless, incapable of forming any words.

"Nobody knows," Kirku responded. "There is really no acceptable reason for how he escaped that I can think of. It was thought to be impossible."

Aang overcame his shock. "So, we have learned who I really am, the legend of the Avatar, the identities of Raava and Vaatu, the Lion Turtles, Avatar Wan, energybending, and now, you tell us that Vaatu has escaped." He summed up, "What does this have to do with the scroll? That's the reason I had summoned you!" Aang raised his voice as he spoke.

Kirku sighed, "If you wish to know about the scroll, Avatar Aang, know this: bending over the generations has become different. The beliefs of where to draw your chi are not as they used to be. In the Fire Nation, for the past several centuries, you draw from the feelings of anger and hate, but in my time, we drew from our passion and the life that we felt from our own Inner Flame."

Aang nodded, "Yes, I know, that's how I firebend," he noticed Azula stare at him after his words.

His past life slouched before him, not looking like the great Avatar any longer, "I died quite prematurely upon my death, Avatar Aang. You see, Avatar's live for a very long time, sometimes even half a millennium because of the strength of our chi – Avatar Wan himself lived for that long. So, because of this, there has only been around thirty of us to ever exist because the Avatar Spirit has only existed for ten thousand years." Kirku paused and his ethereal hands clenched, a foreboding omen. "I was supposed to live for several more decades, maybe centuries even if the winds of fate were kind. But one day, when a meteor crashed into the ocean near the Northern Water Tribe, causing monstrous tsunamis and earthquakes that threatened to sink the Tribe, I battled it, combating everything at once."

"And that's what killed you, isn't it?" Azula said softly.

"Yes, because while I did defeat the meteor, it defeated me as well." Kirku closed his eyes, "Avatars, when they know that their time of death is near, must prepare the world for their passing, and that is the only way the transition will be peaceful. But similar in how your predecessor, Avatar Roku's passing was unexpected, mine was just as much so."

"There's more to that than at first glance," he observed. "Why?"

Kirku grimaced, looking almost humiliated, and also tired. "My situation in the years prior to my death was somewhat similar to what yours is now, Avatar Aang."

"How so? What do you mean?"

"About a decade before my death, the Waterbenders were almost wiped out just like the Air Nomads were."

Aang's eyes widened in shock and dread, "What? Are you serious? So, you understand my situation and my grief!"

"Somewhat, Avatar Aang, somewhat. You see, Waterbenders in my time lived where the Earth Kingdom is now - Earth and Water lived together. It was not ideal, believe me, but I had never discovered a solution to the problem, which was my fault, thus inadvertently becoming the
catalyst for my people's near extinction. For centuries, the Earthbenders and Waterbenders had been conflicted in their beliefs, petty squabbles resulting in multiple wars being declared many times, but each time, I had always put a stop to it. But, eventually, I failed to see how dark the emotions truly were between Water and Earth. I was negligent, Avatar Aang, in preserving the peace and I pray that you do not make the same mistakes that I did."

"What happened?"

"While I was away, helping the Air Nomads build their Air Temples, the Earthbenders attacked my people, trying to destroy them once and for all." Kirku sighed tiredly, his water-colored, ethereal eyes closing. "Although the resulting conflict was nowhere near the massacre level of the Air Nomads, Avatar Aang, it was devastating, and I felt responsible because I hadn't been there to help my people."

Aang felt compassion for his past life, and to his shame, relief that someone else understood his guilt and pain. "Just as I wasn't there to help my people," he said softly, dimly noticing that Azula had inched closer to him in hopes of offering small amounts of comfort.

She placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, staring at Kirku, "And the Waterbenders had no chance without you there, in all honesty, because the Earthbenders were surrounded by their element." Azula then frowned, "So, that was when the Waterbenders moved to the Poles, right? After their near-genocide?"

Kirku nodded, "Yes, but only to the North Pole. It wasn't until far after my reign as Avatar when the Southern Water Tribe rose to power." He looked directly at Aang. "Because of me, there weren't many Waterbenders left in the world and no Masters, at that – they had all been killed in the 'battle' with the Earthbenders. So, in hopes of rectifying my mistakes, I convinced the Ocean and the Moon Spirits to forfeit their immortality and join the Mortal Realm to help the Waterbenders rebuild. It was bitter work, but my efforts paid off for on the Winter Solstice, they joined the Mortal Realm, immortality forever out of their grasp. They joined the North and gifted many with waterbending who had the correct mindset, and the children who were soon born were also Waterbenders, blessed by the Ocean and Moon. I sired many children with multiple women, trying to help as best as I could with my blood, but I was the only true Master remaining. I trained everyone, my own children, as best as I could, but the meteor soon arrived. A decade was nowhere near enough time."

"And you didn't have enough time to help your people rebuild," Azula concluded almost sadly.

"Yes, and without someone to teach them the true ways, the Waterbenders at the North chose to learn on their own, and because of this, some of the true teachings have been lost. Eventually, as I mentioned earlier, far after my death, a group went to the South to make their own city." Kirku closed his eyes. "After my death, much knowledge to the bending arts have been lost. I wasn't there to make sure people stayed true to their teachings because I hadn't prepared them for my death. The bending arts became corrupt." His past life stared at him, "For example, Avatar Aang, I once stumbled upon an Airbender who had become one with the wind. As far as I know, he is the only mortal who mastered it, although he had claimed that he would teach every Airbender the art – personally, I didn't believe that he would, and if what I've gathered is true, he never did as he claimed that he would. His name was Laghima and he revealed that the Air Spirit had visited his dreams, divulging the very secret to weightlessness. Because I was the Avatar, he revealed the secret to me and once I saw through my misconceptions, I became the only Avatar to have ever mastered it; I am the one whose power you used during Ba Sing Se."

Aang looked to him, "So, the unnamed Airbender wasn't the first to achieve weightlessness, then! So you had this scroll made? Was it you, or maybe this Laghima?" He then held it up for Kirku to see.
"No, I did not construct it, Avatar Aang. I can only assume that Laghima did, but if that is true, it is over eight thousand years old, so I do not know how you acquired that scroll, but I can tell you that it is doable – you can learn it. It's real. All of it, it's real," Kirku sounded desperate.

Aang nodded, "I believe you, but since you know the truth to weightlessness, I need you to teach me."

"I cannot do that, Avatar Aang,"

"Why not?" He demanded, "I only need to summon-"

"It would be pointless because you already are in possession of the knowledge on how to master it, Avatar Aang. Only you can unearth that which are misconceptions in your heart, soul, and mind. It is something that only you can do for yourself. It isn't something that I can... teach you. You must discover it on your own."

Azula then spoke up as Aang was too shell-shocked by Kirku's words, "What do we need to do?"

Kirku sighed, "I do not know. Vaatu has escaped from the Tree of Time by means unknown and a reckoning is coming, one that you must be ready to face, Avatar Aang." Roku and Pathik's warnings were beginning to come together in a nightmarish puzzle, and Aang's eyes were open; he began to see, and what he saw were the outlines of something sinister. Kirku then gave him one last word of advice, "I know that you are angry with your friends, but you will need their help for this. Do not let your bitterness get the better of you." He then suddenly dispersed and drifted back into Aang's body.

For several moments, both Aang and Azula stared at the spot where Kirku had just been, the ethereal being's words still floating in the air.

"That's a lot to process," he eventually said, trailing off as he laughed in disbelief.

Azula nodded and fully turned towards him, "It is quite invigorating to know all of that history while the rest of the world remains ignorant of the truth."

"Oh, believe me, I agree. It's how it feels in the Avatar State but then, it's even more... intoxicating, if I'm being honest." He saw her golden eyes widen and something like that almost like excitement was carved into her features. Before she could say anything, though, he stood up. "I will need to warn the others, I suppose. It wouldn't bode well if I didn't, I must say."

Azula's features smoothed and she then looked outside, "Not yet, Aang, you should take a break. It's been hours since you left this room; I don't know how you do it, I really don't." She smirked and stood up, staring up into his gray eyes. "Come on, Avatar, let's go destroy some more of these feeble mortals in a game of volleyball."

"I don't know, Azula,"

"Aang, worry about the world tomorrow, okay?" Azula's eyes were beckoning and he found himself unable to resist her, a dangerous possibility but he honestly didn't care. He was able to admit that he was attracted to her, but nothing would ever come of it, though. He would make sure that it wouldn't. And although knowing that he shouldn't, he decided to go destroy some people in volleyball.

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Storming into his meditation like an angry Earthbender, Azula's features had lost the softness that
they had had the previous day when they had both spoken with Avatar Kirku. Instead, her golden eyes burned with rage, and he wasn't certain if that anger was directed at him or someone else. And the most disconcerting item in regard to her appearance: a giant, beautiful Warhawk sat on her shoulder, animal eyes connecting with Aang’s own.

His eyes widened, "What is that?" He questioned incredulously, sighing in regret once the words passed his lips. He knew what the bird was, but he had been so surprised that his response to such an occurrence was instinctive.

Azula raised a brow, "It's from my brother," her voice was flat, and Aang winced as her eyes began to assess him critically. She was very angry, no doubt because of what the message that Zuko had written entailed, but he felt the beginnings of trepidation simmer in his mind. Whatever news Zuko had, it must be bad to inflict such an expression on Azula's face.

Slowly standing up from his Lotus Position, he stepped closer to Azula’s tense form and gently took the scroll from her hand, his fingers crinkling around the parchment, and stared down at its words. His eyes grew larger the further he read:

Azula,

I do hope that this letter finds you in good spirits and that the house isn't depressing you too much, but I'm afraid that if the house somehow hadn't been depressing you, my next words will. Our father has escaped from his prison with the aid of, as the guards have claimed, a dark presence. We know how, but the details are very disturbing. He escaped a little over two months ago, and I had stubbornly, mistakenly believed that I could handle it, but I can admit that I was wrong – I made a mistake, Azula. I have written the Avatar countless messages but each time, I have received no response. Nobody knows where he is, and I've even thought him to be dead, but the Fire Sages have thankfully assured me that the Avatar hadn't died. Mother and uncle are here, and they are as concerned as I am by these drastic and dreadful turn of events.

I have grown truly desperate, I will be honest with you. The Gaang, the group of peasants – the merry crew of misfits, if you will – whom you battled during the Great War several times have arrived at the Caldera after I requested their aid. And as I had suspected, they know nothing and have been no help. I've tried to leave you in peace, but I can do so no longer, Azula. I am ordering you, as your older brother and your Fire Lord, to return to the Caldera with the utmost of haste. I would like nothing more than to let you live out the remainder of your life in our house on Ember Island, but I can't. I've hit my limit, I truly have. Please come to the Caldera, I'm begging you – yes, begging you. Now you surely understand how frantic I have become. I haven't known how to go about this because the only person who could truly understand what is going on has disappeared.

I need you here, and I swear on my honor that Kuei will receive no words about your arrival from any of those who are loyal to me, and thus you. If he does somehow get wind of your residence, whether on Ember Island or in the Caldera, I will go to war, I don't care. I'm furious and he has insulted me one too many times. Please reply to this letter so that I can know that our father hasn't gotten to you again. Be careful, sister. I don't know what I would do if I was ever notified of your passing.

Your brother, Fire Lord Zuko.

Aang looked away from the words after reading through it several times. He had known a few weeks ago that he had been at Ember Island for too long at a time, but if he was honest with himself, he hadn't cared; he had needed the vacation and in hindsight, he did feel a lot better.

He had decided to indulge in his selfishness for a few months and had hoped that the world could handle his small absence, but apparently, he had been wrong – the Avatar is always needed somewhere, no matter how petty the problem.
He did feel incredibly bad, though. He had had no idea that Zuko was pulling his hair out in frustration or that his friend had been attempting to create contact with him for months. Aang then looked at Azula, "I guess that this is the end of our vacation," he said, not even attempting to smother the sadness from coloring his words.

Azula smirked up at him instead, "No, it's not, Aang," she said confidently. "I'm going with you."

He inhaled sharply and frowned down at her, "You are wanted by the entire Earth Kingdom for execution. You'll be killed the second when someone recognizes you."

"Not with you around, Avatar," she purred, golden eyes gleaming like melted gold under the light of Agni's rays. He suddenly realized that she had put a considerable amount of thought into her decision, probably having used the time after she had first read the letter.

In spite of the truth in her words, Aang shook his head. "No, you should stay here. Your brother has been messaging me for the past months and I had had no idea. Although he declared that he would go to war over you, no doubt a boost to your ego-"

She smiled, "Oh, it is, believe me,"

"- Zuko won't be thinking that way when both the Water Tribes and all of the Earth Kingdom is breathing down his neck, trust me, okay?"

"Because he had stupidly dismantled most of the military instead of following your advice."

He slowly nodded his head, finally thinking that he had begun to convince her. "Azula, listen to me, it's me your brother truly needs there, not you," he said adamantly.

Azula laughed and the sound echoed in the air, and Aang had to admit that the sound was more than pleasant. "Don't be so arrogant, Avatar. I will be just as much help as you," she became serious, "After all, I spoke with Avatar Kirku as well and might remember things that you do not. Who else do you think that this dark presence is whom the guards claimed had whisked my father away from his prison." Her golden eyes connected almost intimately with his own as she stared up at him. "Vaatu, Aang, it's Vaatu. Remember what Avatar Kirku said? Vaatu has recently escaped his prison in the Tree of Time, so I would bet all of the gold and treasure in the Royal coffers and my brother's own personal coffers that I'm right and it's Vaatu who is the dark presence. And this is my father we're talking about, too, remember? If Zuzu hasn't found any leads in two months, then he will need all the help that he can get. Plus, my brother, the Fire Lord, implicitly ordered me to return to the Caldera. Are you willing to disobey the Fire Lord, Avatar?"

Aang almost felt insulted by her question, "Yes, I am, of course, I am." He saw that she looked greatly pleased by his answer for some reason. "The Avatar is loyal to no ruler or nation, even though we will usually claim permanent residence in the land of our birth. We are above such trivial subjects as a King or Fire Lord. Just ask Avatar Roku. The only reason that Fire Lord Sozin ever succeeded was that my predecessor's sentiment towards his childhood best friend blinded him. Just the simple presence of Avatar Roku negated all of Sozin's plans for decades."

She smiled, "Well, I'd say that if anyone can negate the threat of the Earth Kingdom, it's you, Aang. Just do what Roku did. So, when do you want to leave?"

Aang stared at her in complete bemusement. How did she fail to see the threat that her life was in? "I don't understand," he said after a moment. "Why? You could stay on Ember Island for the rest of your days and eat all of the Komodo Chicken that you could ever want. Why do you so desperately want to go with me?"
"I'd like to help put my father back in prison or kill him. I have made many mistakes, Aang, too many, and I want to do something good. I want to redeem myself just as Zuzu did. Can't you understand that?"

Aang slouched, feeling his Earthbender-like stubbornness ebb away at the sight of her almost-hypnotic eyes. "Very well," he conceded, "but you will not attempt to harm any of the Gaang, got it? You will be a tremendous help, and although I am beyond furious with them, I will need their help; Kirku said as much." He sighed aloud, and ran a hand through his hair, "So, I guess that we're both leaving Ember Island, then."

Azula smirked up at him in victory, "Like there would be any other outcome."

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Looking over the side of the saddle to view the world below was intoxicating, Azula had to admit. She had always viewed herself as above the rest of the world because of her beauty, strength, firebending, and wit, but now, she truly was above them – like a goddess looking over the mortals, like the Avatar himself.

Aang was sitting on the Sky Bison, Appa's head, looking completely at ease, looking a part of the wind as the scroll mentioned that he should be able to master. Shivers, in spite of her best efforts, wracked her frame and she breathed small puffs of her fire every few moments to warm herself up. "Aren't you cold?" She growled, her voice carrying towards her companion's ears.

He turned around and effortlessly leaped into the saddle, landing soundlessly in a sitting position, smiling at her in amusement. "Not one bit. I can't remember the last time I truly ever felt cold, not even when I was trapped for a century in the Iceberg. Waterbenders have some resistance to the cold, and plus, I'm an Airbender, so I am used to it." He shrugged. "Appa here doesn't ever feel the cold just like me, I think. Not even at the Northern or Southern Water Tribes. His fur is too warm and thick."

"A wise trait to have," she pointed out, staring at Appa. She remembered her actions towards the animal all of those years ago and one day, she had approached the Sky Bison, feeling quite foolish, and apologized at Aang's behest.

She hadn't dared disobey, especially when his gray eyes had roiled like mighty storm clouds. She had felt guilty, though, especially when Appa had roared, the air around him exploding off him in waves, rushing at Azula in a violent and potentially deadly attack.

Thankfully, Aang had simply stepped in front of her, the air becoming harmless in his presence, or else, she knew that she would have been seriously injured. Aang had then hugged his best friend, the sight too intimate for her eyes, but she hadn't been able to look away. The Avatar had coaxed his friend to listen to her words, and he had motioned her forward.

Azula had slowly and warily stepped towards the massive Sky Bison, memories of her shooting fire blasts at him ever-present in her mind. She had been a hair's breadth away from the enormous, tough horns that, if she remembered correctly from her studies, could pierce through a Dragon's hide, the only breed of animal in the history of the world that could do so. It was rumored that Fire Lord Sozin had hunted the Air Nomads for that reason, too.

"I wasn't a good person," she had stared into Appa's intelligent eyes. "I enjoyed imposing my strength over others, and I'm sorry, Appa, I truly am." She had swallowed, feeling Aang's gaze on her, but she needed to finish, needed to finally release a truth. "I am desperate for a new beginning, one where I'm not haunted by my crimes and deeds, but one where I'm at peace." Her eyes had, to her shame, welled with several tears. "I know that you don't like me, and I can't
blame you for that, I truly can't because if the roles were reversed, I probably would have already killed you. You are far more generous than I, so I thank you, Appa."

The Sky Bison had then, in a blurred motion, loomed over her, floating several meters above the stone, mouth extended right towards the tip of her head.

"Appa," Aang had then warned, his voice clear and strong, echoing through the courtyard of the home on Ember Island. "Think, my friend, please. Because whatever it is you're thinking, you need to rethink it."

"And what's he thinking, then?" She had asked, staring up at Appa, poise echoing in her words.

She had been able to hear Aang's sigh, "He's thinking of eating you,"

"I thought that he was a vegetarian, too, just as you are," she had grit out through clenched teeth, now extremely wary of Appa.

"He is, but he's angry," Aang had then moved out of her line-of-sight, and the brief thought that he was going to allow his best friend to swallow her whole had echoed in her mind, but she had shaken it off, knowing that it was preposterous. "Whatever happens, Azula, don't firebend, okay? You mustn't firebend."

"Why?"

"You're about to find out," his words must have been a signal because once the last word had been spoken, Appa's open jaw had then clamped around her upper body, her eyes slamming shut as true terror spread through her mind as she prepared for the Gardens of the Dead, hoping that her grandfather awaited her and was proud of her, but that was when she had realized that there was no pain splintering through her mind and body. Slowly, she had opened her eyes, and she had noticed that Appa's mouth was quite large, but filled with saliva that, she then noticed, was drizzled all over her face. For several moments, she had stayed inside Appa's unthreatening mouth, his large tongue smearing all over her body and face. His large teeth were very near, but they didn't indicate that they would tear her body in half.

Then, after several more moments, Appa had practically spit her back out, forcing her to fall to her knees in a heap of saliva and ruined clothes. Instead of becoming angry, though, Azula had slowly stood to her feet, Aang's gaze on her back, and approached Appa again. "Thank you, for your mercy, Appa. You needn't worry about Aang, I won't harm him, all right? I consider him a friend and I care about him."

Appa's intelligent eyes had then narrowed and then he huffed, the air whooshing wildly as he plopped back down on his belly to rest. Aang had then appeared next to her in a blink of an eye, petting Appa's forehead, directly over the arrow. "He's forgiven you," he had said. "Now, you must earn his trust, though."

Azula intended to earn Appa's trust no matter what it took, if only for Aang.

"It's nice up here, I must admit, Aang," she suddenly said, watching as the Avatar looked delighted by her words. "I understand the appeal, being up in the sky with no one to bother you or press burdens on your shoulders. This lifestyle is different than the one I experienced at the palace."

He smiled, "It's freeing, Azula, and it's why the Air Nomads lived in isolation. They never cared what the other nations thought of them, and they didn't care about such trivial things like everyone else."
"They were just only concerned with themselves, though, right?" She finished, watching as his smile faded. "It's the truth, isn't it? The Air Nomads had no connections with the other nations, and ultimately, it was their own fault."

"Yes, it was," he nodded his head. "You're right, but hopefully, once I decipher this puzzle," he waved the airbending scroll at her, "then I'll be able to begin to work on rebuilding my people – and, of course, after we put your father and Vaatu back in their prisons."

"And by rebuilding, you mean repopulating, don't you?" She inquired with a raised brow. "Surely there have been offers by many women."

She felt relief that distaste flashed across his features at her last words. "Yes, that is what I mean, Azula. Avatar Kirku's words about his own failure with the Water Tribes have been echoing in my ears ever since. Who knows how long I'll live? No one except the winds of fate, and although I have the potential to live a long time, it's only potential, not reality."

"How will you repopulate, then?" She asked after several moments, understanding his reasoning behind such a decision. The Air Nomads, specifically the Airbenders, had to return to the world. His own feelings – and Azula's strange emotions concerning the topic, at that – didn't matter.

Aang looked down at his hands, "I don't know that part, Azula, I don't. I want to marry someone who would be good for me and my future children, but I don't know. I need airbending children, and since I'm the Avatar, I can sire children who bend any of the elements, not just air. The Sages of all nations have continually, annoyingly suggesting that I must bed every non-bending fertile woman in the world, regardless if they are already married." She wasn't surprised by the thought, by she found the idea of Aang doing such a thing… wrong, and she also felt small sparks of envy in her heart that she refused to dwell on. "I find the idea deplorable, but now that I'm older, a very man myself, I can understand such an action."

"Sozin slaughtered an entire nation down to a single person, and that person is the Avatar, who isn't just an Airbender, but a Waterbender, Earthbender, and a Firebender," she said quietly, and for the first time, she truly began to realize how detestable her great-grandfather's actions were. Because of Sozin, a century and more has passed with no Airbenders save the Avatar. "It's a sound strategy, Aang, albeit a quite difficult path, I must say."

"And yet, I must do it if I find no wife who is willing to bear me an entire nation. And even then, I don't know if that will be enough. I might need to pull an Avatar Kuruk and sire hundreds of bastards with many different women, no matter their nation, spreading my Air-blessed seed across the Four Nations!"

Looking at his forlorn and almost heart-broken expression, Azula then began to envision a future where she herself was that wife. After all, she owed him a debt, an unpayable one in all honesty. If she bore Airbenders by him, her debt would be resolved for she would be giving him the greatest gift that he could ever wish for – the return of Airbenders to the world, the true Air Nomads. The thought, she had to admit in realization, had a lot of perks and merits for her. Aang was the only person in the entire world, besides maybe her brother, who she implicitly trusted, and she had always yearned, if she ever did marry, to be forever joined with one whom she trusted. Plus, she instinctively realized that she would enjoy it; the Avatar was an incredibly handsome man, a god amongst frail mortals, the most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on. She knew that she had inherited her father's ambition, his attraction to power – rumor had it, that her father had fallen in love with her mother after she had bested him, the second son of the Fire Lord, in a firebending duel. Some days, Azula had observed the Avatar as he simply meditated by the ocean at night, the way how the water would swirl around his sitting form without touching him, respecting his strength. Then, when he would 'fool around', as he put it, Azula had glimpsed his
subtle supremacy, when all of the elements responded to him at once, circling around his body in a
display of absolute power.

It had been an arousing sight, indeed.

She had always known, growing up during her childhood, that she would be married off to
strengthen the Fire Royal Family, and that she wouldn't have a choice, only following her father's
orders. But now, she suddenly realized that she wouldn't mind being married to the Avatar
himself, the most powerful being in the entire world, and she also wouldn't mind bearing him
airbending children instead of Firebenders.

She had become quite soft, indeed, but it wasn't something that she despised, actually. It was a
relief to shy further and further away from that girl she had once been, and none of the great leaps
of progress that she had undertaken would have been possible without Aang.

During her thoughts, Aang had opened the airbending scroll and he suddenly sighed heavily,
forcing Azula's eyes to connect to his own. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong," he looked
down at the scroll, fingers curling around the parchment, the crinkling sound a foreboding omen.

To take her mind off of the trail of thought that it had wandered, she pondered the scroll, "It says
to let go of your misconceptions, correct?"

"Yes, that's what it says. Why?"

Azula pointed toward the scroll held tightly in his hand, "What if you have misconceptions that
you are unaware of?" She raised a brow.

"But how do I know what is labeled as a misconception and what isn't, then?" He exclaimed, his
voice rising at the end.

She honestly had no idea and was about to suggest that he should summon Avatar Kirku forward
again to ask him, but Appa bellowed, the sound exploding the air around them.

Azula looked over the side of the saddle, "We've finally arrived at the Caldera, Aang," she called
out, watching as her companion hopped back on Appa's head, scroll nowhere to be seen.

Through Aang's guidance, Appa landed in the palace's courtyard, to where her brother was
waiting, and when he caught sight of her, his jaw dropped.

She calmly hopped off Appa and while walking towards her brother, smiled innocently. "Hello,
Zuzu, can you guess who I found?"

Aang sheepishly came to stand next to her, Appa looming over them all as Momo chirped, and
she dimly noticed that he was taller than her brother. "Sorry that I never got any of your messages,
Zuko. I was on a vacation."

Zuko closed his eyes, inhaling slowly, "At my… own house?" He asked quietly, "That's where
you've been? The entire fucking time while I've been going insane?" True anger colored his tone
and Azula was slightly impressed.

The Avatar shrugged, not looking the least bit remorseful, the sight making Azula's respect and
admiration for him deepen. "Yeah, it was nice – I needed it, I truly did – and when I had arrived, I
ran into your sister of all people."

Zuko's face was pinched in fury, "I've been messaging you for months, Aang! What the fuck? I
would have appreciated a letter declaring that you were taking a little vacation."


"- at my house! I've been tearing out my hair in frustration." Her brother leaned forward, lowering his voice, his fury not abating in the slightest. "I had to call the Gaang because you weren't answering," he hissed through grit teeth, golden eyes burning much like their father's always had.

Aang's eyes closed and Azula remembered Avatar Kirku's final words, "We would need them anyway Zuko to face this new threat." He said solemnly.

Her brother's face registered many surprises, angry rapidly fading away as opened his mouth, but just as he was about to speak, the water peasants came into the courtyard.

"Aang, holy shit, man, you've grown – and Appa has, too! And is that hair I see covering that arrow-head of yours?" Azula knew that this was Sokka; she could tell because he still had that annoying, grating voice that he had possessed when she had been hunting them all. She noticed Suki, her once-prisoner, next to him and felt a mixture of guilt and satisfaction when the woman wouldn't even look in her direction, having obviously deduced who she was. Sokka came and stood next to Zuko and looked at her curiously, "Do I know you?" He asked innocently, eyebrows raised.

Azula narrowed her eyes in disbelief. She had literally chased them around the world and he didn't even recognize her. She felt insulted, offended by his lack of memory. She was memorable, and she would remind him of that fact. Raising her hand in greeting, it became alight with her sapphire flames, "Hello,"

Sokka's reaction was comical, "Azula!" He screeched like a wounded animal and stumbled away from her, tripping over Suki.

Aang's laughter was a pleasant sound, "You really didn't recognize her? That's quite sad, in all honesty. I knew that it was her the moment when I saw her eyes."

Azula felt a fierce pleasure that the Avatar could recognize her just by seeing her eyes but refused to dwell on why. She also smirked at the small insult that he had thrown at his former friend.

"You were with Lightning Psycho, Twinkletoes? Are you serious?" The Earthbender's incredulous voice cut through the room. "And here I had thought that you were in the Spirit World, but nope! You were consorting with the enemy!"

While she was impressed that the girl had the courage to call her 'lightning psycho', she felt the temperature drop as Aang turned towards her, gray eyes unfriendly. "Hello, Toph," he then gestured to Azula, stepping closer. "It was pure happenstance when we ran into each other on Ember Island, and Azula is not the enemy, you would do well to remember that."

An awkward silence enveloped the courtyard as Toph seemed taken aback by Aang's words, but just as Azula suspected, she shrugged and stomped closer, unseeing eyes assessing Azula. She herself raised an eyebrow at the Earthbender, watching as the blind woman scrunched her features. Toph seemed to observe her for several moments, and then, without a show of hesitation, she swiftly punched Azula on the shoulder.

Zuzu's golden eyes filled with dread, but he needn't worry about her responding with a blue fire blast to the woman's face. Aang had warned her when they had left Ember Island that the blind Earthbender found a source of joy when punching people, so he had recommended being prepared for a hard and bone-bruising punch to her arm.

Azula smiled at the sight of Sokka hiding behind Suki, but her smile faded when she glimpsed the
peasant who had defeated her on Sozin's Comet, during her break from reality.

Katara.

The waterbending peasant stood next to Toph and seemed to stay away from Zuzu, eyes fearfully glancing in his direction every few moments. Azula's eyes narrowed at the sight, realizing that something must have happened between the two of them.

"Azula," the peasant said flatly, crossing her arms over her breasts.

While she would admit that the temptation to call her peasant was strong, she wouldn't break the fragile peace that had been established. And while she could claim to be many things, she was not stupid.

"Katara," she intoned just as flatly.

The peasant's face registered surprise but her features smoothed out quickly, and instead of saying anything further to Azula, the peasant turned to Aang and smiled hesitantly. "Hi, Aang," she said softly.

Seeing the tense posture that the Avatar had erected, she truly hoped that he would enter the Avatar State like he had said he might – 'maybe flash the Avatar State at them,' – but she knew that he, unfortunately, wouldn't.

For now.

Instead, he smiled, but she noticed that it was as fake a smile that she had ever seen. "Hello, Katara, it's nice to see you." While his voice was infused with joy and happiness at seeing a 'friend', Azula noticed that his gray eyes were stormy.

The peasant looked immensely relieved, arms dropping to her sides in euphoria. "It's so good to see you!" Before Azula could even react, the peasant surged forward and wrapped her arms around the Avatar.

Azula frowned, feeling her hands clench into fists, sparks of blue flame begging to be unleashed. She wasn't sure why the picture of the peasant hugging the Avatar so fiercely unsettled her deeply, but when she noticed that Aang stiffened, eyes as hard as metal, all her anxiety, for some reason, faded away, swiftly to be replaced by admiration - the Avatar could look very intimidating if he wanted to.

Katara pulled back after several moments and Azula saw that her brother gestured to the palace, "How about we discuss the escape of my father, and then afterward, we can all eat a good meal? Does that sound good?"

Aang almost seemed to bristle at her brother's suggestion, "Appa and Momo are coming with us,"

"You're not serious, right?" Zuzu leaned forward, eyes darting from the doorway towards Appa's large size. "He won't even fit!"

Azula smiled as Aang didn't even bat an eye, "I'll make him fit. He's coming with, or you can have the food served out here. I'm not leaving him alone – and Momo, neither."

Her brother didn't look particularly displeased by the suggestion, more amused than anything. "Very well, but it's up to you, Aang, to entertain him."

"Believe me, he and Momo will be fine." Aang started walking forward, Appa trailing right
behind him, "Come on, everyone," he then motioned with his hands and the doorways stretched, the metal bending to create a large entrance.

She saw Toph's jaw drop, "I didn't know that you could metalbend! I never taught you!"

Aang didn't turn around when he answered, "I learned it based on my memories of your movements and your words, and plus, I've learned a lot since the Great War ended."

The Earthbender looked stunned and the peasant swiftly stepped after the Avatar, "What else did you learn, Aang? And by the way, congratulations on mastering metalbending."

Azula and the others journeyed through the new entryway, listening to Aang's answer. "I have mastered all of the elements, a true Master, a fully-realized Avatar," Azula remembered when she had taught him lightning generation on Ember Island, how the Avatar had mastered it so quickly that Azula had been envious, but it had dissolved after Aang's boyish enthusiasm after becoming a true Master of Fire was apparent. "Because I was alone in my travels after the Great War, I had a lot of time, an excess of it. I honed my skills, practicing and practicing until my bones began to splinter. Eventually, I mastered them all up to the level that I had in airbending. And, on top of that, I learned how to heal and," he trailed off, darting a look at Katara's shocked expression and seemed to change his mind. "So, I learned healing, metalbending, sandbending, and recently, thanks to Azula, lighting generation."

Gasp echoed as Azula noticed her brother's eyes widen, "You know the cold-blooded fire?" He asked in astonishment.

Before Aang could answer, the peasant broke in, looking so betrayed that Azula almost laughed aloud. "Aang, why would you… do that?" The question was heavy with implications as the peasant shot poisonous glares at her, probably believing her to be concocting some monstrous plan to kill them all.

"Yes, I know lightning generation, Zuko, and I learned it because it's a useful ability, Katara." Azula nodded in agreement, knowing how useful lightning was when wielded properly and to its fullest potential.

Sokka finally spoke, "Well, it is quite terrifying, so who else should know it besides the Avatar?" She risked a glance at her brother, knowing that if anyone besides the Avatar if anyone should know lightning generation, it would be the Fire Lord.

As they all, as a group, along with Appa and Momo, made their way to the dining hall, it was an intense realization when Azula realized that she hated walking these halls. The memories were lurking like ugly beasts, the feeling of her lungs being devoid of air ever-present. She felt constricted and she could almost feel her father looming over as he had always done, commanding perfection or else. Long ago, before her mind had broken, and before her subsequent recovery, she had never thought that she would ever wish to be away from the palace, but now, as she walked through the halls, she wanted nothing more than to leave.

"My liege," the guards bowed to her brother, looking strangely at Appa, and when they noticed her, their eyes bulged from their sockets, their bodies automatically falling into a firebending stance, but when her brother growled lowly, they masked their fear and looked at her warily.

In reply, she smirked at them, feeling relief that she hadn't become too soft.

"Have the staff bring out a meal." Zuzu then commanded, diffusing the tense atmosphere.

They walked into the room and were met with the sight of her uncle and mother. Zuzu's words
from those months ago echoed in her ears, 'When you see mother again, you might just be relieved that she's okay.' And she found that he was right, the sight of her mother was a relief and she smiled at her softly, nodding her head in greeting.

Her mother smiled brilliantly, but instead of making a scene, she nodded her head in greeting, as well.

"Avatar Aang," her uncle stood up, looking surprisingly well. "It is such a relief to see you," he pulled Aang into a hug, and she noticed that he wasn't as fat as he had used to be, and she felt disappointed that she couldn't call him 'uncle fatso' any longer.

"And it is good to see you again, General Iroh," the Avatar smiled genuinely at her uncle.

Then, everyone took their place at the table and Azula found herself trapped between Zuzu and their mother while Aang was squished between Toph and the peasant, Appa plopped on the ground behind him, Momo curled around the Sky Bison's horn. His interactions with everyone, specifically the peasants, the Earthbender, and Suki, seemed calm and even jubilant, but Azula knew better. It was only the calm before the devastating storm.

"So, Aang, even though you read the letter that I sent to my sister, I presume, I think that it bears repeating. About a little over two months ago, my father escaped from his prison with help from, what the guards declared, a dark presence..." Azula drowned out Zuzu's voice; he could be so boring sometimes, and that was why, once upon a time, he and Mai had been so amusing to watch.

"It's definitely spiritual, that's for certain." Aang suddenly said, confidently.

Her uncle nodded, "Yes, Avatar Aang, that is what my nephew and I have also concluded."

Her mother spoke, "What kind of spirit, though? It has to be very powerful to cross into the Mortal Plane."

Everyone looked to Aang and he sighed, "There are only two spirits who have the power to do something like this and who would actually dare to do it." He breathed deeply and didn't speak.

He stood up and walked to where Appa was, leaping onto the Sky Bison's saddle and when he jumped back off only seconds later, his sack was in his hand. He quickly grabbed a piece of paper and a brush and sat back down, leaning over. He was writing something on the paper and Azula had a pretty good guess of what he was writing.

She was right.

Aang flipped over the paper and showed them what he wrote. 'Do not say these names aloud! Names have power. I believe that this is either the work of Koh, the Face Stealer or Vaatu, the Spirit of Chaos and Darkness. Call Koh face and call Vaatu dark. Do not call them by their real names.' Azula wondered why he mentioned something like this now. For days, they had been calling the name of Vaatu aloud. Why begin now?

Azula looked to Toph who was frowning, "What does the paper say? What did you write, Twinkletoes?" The blind girl demanded.

He then turned to the Earthbender and Azula noticed that his lips were pursed in thought. He soon grinned and stepped closer. "Do you trust me?" He questioned, eyes serious.

"Yes, Twinkletoes! Just tell me, already," Toph growled,
Aang's hands snared Toph's shoulders, "Stay still," he ordered, thumbs placed on her solar plexus and forehead. Azula leaned forward, wondering what the Avatar was doing, but based on the looks of realization on the peasants' faces, she was one of the only ones.

Toph had her eyes closed before snapping them open, "Huh, that actually makes sense. Face and Dark, then, will lose to me in battle as we put the Loser Lord back in his cell."

Aang turned back towards everyone, laughing aloud once he noticed Azula's expressions, "I used energybending to give the knowledge of the names to Toph."

"I wasn't aware that you could do that," she commented after a moment, wondering what exactly energybending could do.

The peasant glared at her, "Of course, you wouldn't know that he could do that. You nothing about Aang,"

Azula's lips parted slightly as she registered the peasant's words and her golden eyes narrowed to slits. "I happen to know the Avatar more than you do, Katara, so don't subject me to your disdain, fool."

"Hey, you don't get to talk to her like that!" Sokka's face had turned red and his eyes were glinting with scorn. "In fact, why the fuck is she even here?" Azula felt her mother tense by her side at the words and felt comforted by the fact that she would defend her. "Aang has finally returned, so why is your sister here, Zuko? We don't need her, and we don't even fucking want her."

"She's probably here to gain insight into our plan, so then she can warn her father." Katara's eyes were filled with triumph and Azula had to narrowly refrain from shooting lightning at her. "Once a monster, always a monster. She's still the same – nothing has changed!"

Zuzu's fist clenched near the firewhiskey, "How dare you? No matter what she has done, my sister is a Princess of the Fire Royal Bloodline. I'm giving her a chance, and so should you. I have more reasons to distrust her than you both!"

"An insane Princess, Zuko, or did you forget?" Katara snapped, the water in her chalice swirling. "You're only giving her a chance out of familial duty! Don't you dare try to compare your pain with our own- "

"That's ENOUGH!" Aang's hand smashed onto the table, breaking the entire thing as his expression, although Azula would never admit it, made her feel anxious, almost condemned. The Avatar slowly looked at everyone, leaving no one absent, even her mother. "Azula is here because I wish her to be, and if any of you have a problem, you can, as Toph has said in the past, go sulk to yourself. I trust her-"

"Aang, how could you say that?" Katara interrupted, and Azula leaned forward, ignoring Zuzu's burning eyes and her mother's tightened fists, wanting to see what the Avatar would do. "She shot you with lightning!"

"I forgave her for the lightning strike a long time ago, Katara, and in case you forgot, she taught me lightning generation. It isn't a vile ability," the Avatar's eyes were hard, chilled with arctic ice. "I trust her because she has had many opportunities to kill me if she had wished and hasn't even made an attempt. I trust her because she understands me, and the fact that we share a connection, her and I, has re-solidified that trust." Aang leaned forward, jaw clenched so tightly that Azula was slightly concerned that his jaw bone would grind into dust. "Now, this meal wasn't so that you both could blame Azula for everything that has happened. It was so that we can all come to a common conclusion, and so that I could share several things with you all. That was it, and that's
all I want to talk about. If I hear another word about how Azula is the culprit or how she is evil, I will unleash memories of untold horrors to you both. Do not test me because these memories would make the Mother of Horrors turn away in terror." Suddenly, the Avatar's eyes and tattoos glowed, whispers of ancient power hovering in the air. "This is the last I want to hear of it!"

Zuzu recovered remarkably quickly and took over after the stunned silence that had ensued, Azula particularly delighted in the sight of the pale, whitened faces of the peasants. "So, either Face or Dark did this, right?"

Aang nodded, finally sitting down, not looking at all apologetic for his actions towards his former friends. "That's my suspicion, Zuko,"

Her uncle frowned, "We've all heard of Face, but how come we've never heard of this Dark before?"

Azula saw her mother and Toph nod in agreement, the peasants looking too fearful to bring attention to themselves. She decided to have some fun and spoke, knowing that if either of the peasants tried to blame her because of her knowledge, Aang would unleash the horror of, what she suspected to be the memories of the Air Nomads' slaughter. "Dark is a name that has been lost to the ages. He has been imprisoned for ten thousand years," she said confidently, unable to keep a few chuckles from escaping her lips at the looks of outrage and hatred on the peasants' features. "How do you know that?" Zuzu demanded while Aang looked quite amused by what she had done.

She laughed, waving a hand at her brother. "Please, Zuzu, don't be so nervous. I just spoke with an Avatar who has been dead for thousands of years – eight thousand years, I actually think it was." She smiled innocently, golden eyes daring the peasants.

All eyes eventually turned to Aang, the peasants' shining with betrayal, and he shrugged in admittance, "I was speaking with one of my past lives and Azula joined in on our conversation – she was a great help with everything."

"Very well, Avatar Aang, but how are we going to go about this?" Her mother asked the room, staring at the peasants coldly, and they seemed shocked by her glare; and that was the moment when Azula realized that Zuzu hadn't told them that he had found their mother and that she was sitting with them all.

Toph, who had remained quiet for some time, finally spoke, her irritating voice was as grating as usual, maybe even more so. "Well, all this spirit mumbo jumbo is beyond my expertise."

Sokka rolled her eyes, "Just like everything else," he snarked, finally overcoming his fear from Aang's earlier words.

Before a huge argument would break out, Suki finally spoke, "So, how do we find out which one it is? How do we determine who freed Ozai?"

Azula smirked at them, "Well, since Dark escaped from his prison recently, it's probably him." She offered offhandedly.

Aang's sigh echoed throughout the room, ignoring the peasants' expressions of disbelief once again. "I would agree,"

Her uncle's brows furrowed in contemplation, "I don't know, Avatar Aang and Princess Azula. This entire incident is quite strange."
Azula saw Aang nod his head, "We will need the Order for this, General Iroh."

"You do not need my permission to summon the Order of the White Lotus, Avatar Aang. The Avatar is the founder of our Order and the sole commander of our legions." Her uncle notified them.

Azula's eyes widened. That had been something that she had never heard before, and based on the expressions of everyone else, even Zuzu, they all felt the same as she.

Sokka quickly raised his hand, "So we believe this presence is Dark and that we need the Order's help to face him, correct?" He summed up.

Her uncle nodded his head, raising his cup of tea in the air, "Yes, the circumstances concerning Azula's sudden demand to be turned over by my nephew to the Earth Kingdom are almost frighteningly odd, as well, I must say."

Zuzu agreed, nodding his head fiercely. "Yes, it was most peculiar and definitely unexpected, to say the least, especially the threat of war unless I complied."

Aang's head snapped up at her brother's words. "What did you say?" He demanded, leaning forward, gray eyes serious.

Azula frowned in concern, raising a brow. She had already told him the reason why she had been released by Zuzu to Ember Island. Why did he act so surprised by her brother's words? Had he forgotten?

Zuzu glanced at her and she shrugged, not knowing why Aang had taken such an interest. "Well, I had received a letter months ago that demanded- "

"Yes, I know that, Zuko, but just how unexpected was the demands?" Aang stared at the Fire Lord.

"Completely. I dropped the tea that I was drinking," her brother said seriously.

She saw her uncle wince and she almost laughed at his despair-filled expression.

Aang slumped in his seat, "That's brilliant," he muttered. "Of course, that would work. It's how every spirit's power works."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, Twinkletoes," the Earthbender suddenly said. "Tell us!"

Aang closed his eyes and seemed so tired, "I believe that Dark is using the Earth Kingdom's hatred for the Fire Nation to gain strength – probably the world's hatred for the Children of Fire, actually, not just the Earth Kingdom's. He's been imprisoned for ten thousand years, so that means he's, innately, very weak. He's building his power back up after Wan imprisoned him, but the only problem is, is that I cannot think of any conceivable way as to how he escaped from the Tree of Time." He whispered the last part.

"Is there someone, maybe a spirit who could have potentially freed him?" Toph asked.

Azula shook her head as Aang spoke, "Yes, but it would be implausible, Toph. To get to the Tree of Time without the use of the Portals," he looked to the others, "The Spirit Portals allow people to retain their bending abilities when entering the Spirit World through them. Anyway, to get to the Tree of Time without using the Portals is almost impossible. It would take someone or
something of tremendous power."

Her brother sighed, "So he's using the world's hatred for the Fire Nation to heal himself."

Aang nodded, "I believe so, Zuko,"

"Well, that's just great!" Sokka threw his hands up sarcastically.

Azula agreed but had to admit that it was genius, something that she would do if she had been in Vaatu's position.

"So, how do we stop him?" Suki asked, "And are we ruling out Face?"

"I think that I should travel to Ba Sing Se and speak with Kuei personally about his demands for Azula. And yes, Face could not have been who freed Ozai; the facts don't add up." Aang swiftly stood up, "I'll leave in the morning," he turned to leave, but Azula stopped him, her voice calmly piercing through the air.

"Do you think that it's a good idea to travel to Ba Sing Se when they might, potentially, be under Dark's control?" She asked curiously.

"Lightning Psycho's right, Twinkletoes, no matter how much I wish that she weren't. There's no way you're going to Ba Sing Se by yourself." Toph said bluntly.

Aang stiffened and turned around, "I appreciate the sentiment, but I can take care of myself. I'm not that kid anymore."

"Still, Aang, you can't go alone," the peasant finally spoke, blue eyes blazing with determination. "We should all go,"

"Don't be ridiculous, Katara," Azula said, shaking her head. "For all that we know, Dark and my father could still be in the Fire Nation. Almost everyone needs to stay here in case an attack is launched against my brother."

The peasant glared, "It's quite suspicious that you bring something like that up, isn't it? For all that the rest of us know, Dark and your father might be waiting for your signal to-"

"What did I say earlier, Katara?" Aang's voice harshly cut through the room, his face twisted into a dark frown. "You don't learn, do you?"

Azula saw Sokka's face flush with brotherly rage, "Hey, Aang, how dare-"

Aang looked at him, "Shut up, Sokka. I don't want to hear another word. Do you hear me? My judgment is the only one out of everyone's in this room that can be trusted; all of your emotions from the Great War are clouding your decisions and thoughts about Azula. And her family is willing to potentially overlook certain things. I've spent months with her and can safely say that she won't betray me or kill me, all right? Here's what we are going to do: I will travel alone to Ba Sing Se while the rest of you stay here, guarding the Caldera and Zuko against a potential attack by Ozai and Dark. Ozai wants to regain his firebending, no doubt, and he yearns for the Dragon's Throne once more. He would strike at Zuko if given the opportunity, and with me gone, that's a perfect occasion." His gray eyes looked at everyone but mainly focused on the water peasants. "I hope that I can trust you both to keep your emotions in check while I'm gone; Azula will stay with you, but you will not attempt to harm her, okay? I will be most displeased if you do."

"What happened to you?" The peasant breathed out, looking distraught.
"I grew up," he motioned for Appa and Momo to follow him. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be turning in for the night," Aang said coolly and swiftly exited the room.

Azula mentally applauded the Avatar, extremely impressed by his actions and demeanor.

For several moments, silence reigned unchallenged until it was pierced by a fiery Waterbender.

"What did you do to him?" The peasant demanded, blue eyes burning with loathing. "What have you done to Aang to force him to act so... callous?"

She raised a brow and decided to be a little cruel, twisting the invisible dagger even more; in her eyes, they deserved it. "It wasn't me who did anything, Katara, except offer a shoulder for him to lean on."

Suki tilted her head, finally showing some emotion: fury. "You seduced him, didn't you?" She breathed out, cheeks flushed as she clenched her fists, "Of course, it's so clear now,"

Zuzu stood to his feet, a deadly expression coloring his face. "If you're implying what I think you are, I could order your execution right now." Azula turned to her brother in surprise, shocked that he would still care for her so much. "Even though my threats don't hold the same weight as Aang's, they are still plenty worrisome. You are in my nation, my palace, my very home. You have insulted my sister, trying to put forth shame on the House of Agni, something unforgivable."

Her uncle placed a calming hand on Zuzu's shoulder, his expression never changing, whereas Azula's mother glared at the peasants and Suki with an intensity that could melt all of the ice in both of the Poles.

"I think that all of our emotions are frayed by the news of my brother's escape," her uncle said sagely, voice calm. "Now, if we aren't careful, then this conflict could splinter us, dividing us against this common, powerful enemy."

Azula stood up as well, recognizing that she should depart before the room became physically violent. "Well, goodnight," she bowed mockingly to the peasants and turned to her brother, "I assume that I will be in my old quarters, brother mine, correct?"

The Fire Lord raised his one eyebrow, "Do you honestly think that I would give you permission to return to your old quarters?"

Azula smirked, "Yes, yes, I do,"

Zuzu smiled slightly and waved her away, "Go ahead," he muttered.

She smiled, "That was so kind of you. Thank you, Zuzu,"

"Yeah, whatever,"

Shaking her head, she left the dining hall in pursuit of the shadows of her past, refusing to let them triumph over her.

"Azula!" She whirled around, hands alight with blue flames, but she faltered when she saw her mother approaching, "Can I speak with you for but a moment?"

Wetting her lips, she snuffed out the flames. "Very well, what do you need, mother?"

Her mother's face was soft, proud in the light of Agni's dimming rays. "I had wanted to see how you were doing, but from what I've gathered and witnessed with my own eyes, you are
flourishing."

Azula nodded her head slowly, "Yes, I am, mother," she felt a smile smirk curve across her lips. "I feel better than I ever have, in all honesty."

Her mother smiled brilliantly, "You have no idea how happy that makes me feel, to hear those words." Abruptly, though, her mother's hands twitched, fire sparking across her fingertips, "Don't listen to those foolish- "

"Mother, please," she laughed. "I'm a grown woman, okay? If anything, their words were amusing because they have no idea how badly they had fucked up."

"And you're talking about Avatar Aang, aren't you?"

"Yes, they abandoned him, mother, like he, the Avatar, was marketplace trash. One day, they were there, and the next – gone."

Her mother's eyes clouded with sadness, "You're not only talking about those fools, are you?"

Inhaling slowly, she nodded. "No, I'm not. I understand why you left, I truly do, but… I also don't understand at the same time."

Tears glittered in her mother's golden eyes, "Azula, my precious daughter, I hope you know that whenever you're ready, if you ever will be, I'll always be waiting."

"Understood, mother," she whirled around, not wanting to continue her conversation with her mother. She didn't owe her mother anything, not at all.

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No matter how hard she had tried, Azula could not sleep. Phantoms from the past were lurking in every corner of her mind. Her mother's words were echoing in her mind, and there was a void in her mind because a certain Avatar wasn't asleep on her bedroom floor. So, she finally decided to give up after several hours of lying in her bed and stepped towards the secret passage, feeling a soft smile coat her lips at the onslaught of memories that flooded her mind.

When they had been only children, she and Zuzu had used to always play in all of the secret passages, jumping out to try to scare the guards and servants. Her smile soon faded as she realized how long ago that time was, back when their family hadn't been a discombobulated mess, a mockery of what a family should be.

She put her heated hand to the wall and was rewarded when the door opened, and as she stepped inside, the door slid shut soundlessly. She summoned a small flame in her hand and walked through the tunnels, intent on finding Aang, not even trying to dwell on why she wanted to be in his presence; she was afraid of what she would find if she did.

After a few moments of consideration, Azula assumed that the Avatar would be stationed in Zuzu's old room, the Crown Prince's room. Since her brother was now, undoubtedly, in the Fire Lord's quarters, the Crowned Prince's chambers were available. And the Avatar was a guest worthy of every honor possible, and plus, he was Zuzu's best friend; her brother would try to accommodate his friend as best as he could.

Upon arriving at the panel that would lead to the Crowned Prince's room, she put her hand on the wall once more, the stone cool against her fingers. After heating her palm, the door slid open and she stepped through, unsurprised to see the Avatar standing on the balcony.
"Azula," his voice drifted to her ears. "You should be resting," he sounded worried.

She raised a brow, "And so should you, Aang," she walked past the bed, noting that it hadn't even been slept in at all – he had been up all night just as she had been.

"Maybe, but sleepless nights are familiar, too familiar to me."

Quickly, wanting to be close to him, she aligned herself next to his weary form and looked to where he was staring: at the moon.

"Can you see her, the Water Tribe Princess, Yue?" She questioned curiously, not seeing anything except the orb of the great light that could, at times, rival Agni himself in brilliance.

"Yes, I can see all spirits, Azula. When at the Air Temples, I would often see the spirits of my slain kin even though I have already given them their proper burials and rights." Aang said softly, fingers curling around the railing "It's a blessing and a curse, more than you could even imagine."

"I won't insult you by trying," she whispered, feeling great sympathy for him. He was right, she couldn't even imagine what it would feel like to be the last Firebender in the world, to have the unbearable burden of being the only one who could revive a dead race through her own body. She decided to take his mind off his misery, "I'm going with you to Ba Sing Se," she declared confidently, knowing what his reaction would be.

She was right as Aang's gaze snapped to her and, to her amusement, he didn't look tired any longer. "What? No, you're not," his gray eyes were serious.

"Why not, Aang? I would be a huge help," she said calmly. "Plus, Kuei would be more likely to respond to you if I was there."

Aang shook his head, looking quite displeased. "They would kill you," his voice lowered, patience officially broken.

"And the peasants would try to kill me here, Aang," she saw his jaw clench, but he didn't comment. "They hate me with a passion that could rival my own hatred for my father, and they don't actually think that you'll stay true to your promise – 'I will unleash memories of untold horrors to you both. Do not test me because these memories would make the Mother of Horrors turn away in terror.' They don't believe, for even a second, that you'll actually do it." She dared to place a hand on his tense arm, feeling relief that he didn't brush her away. "So, where would I be most safe, Aang?"

"On Ember Island," he responded immediately.

She rolled her eyes, chuckling to herself. "Clever, Avatar, clever, but that isn't an option; you know that. Would I be safer with you, or with the peasants?"

"Your mother, uncle, and brother would be with you here, Azula,"

"Yes, they would, but the peasants would still attempt to kill me; my family isn't near as threatening or as scary as you, the Avatar himself."

Aang finally huffed, "Ba Sing Se, the entire Earth Kingdom itself wants your head on a molded pike, Azula. You place a lot of confidence in me to keep you safe."

"It isn't undeserved, Aang, you more than live up to it. They wouldn't dare to try to kill me with you there, and plus," Azula smirked, their eyes connecting. "Toph will be joining us, too."
Apparently, she had underestimated the Avatar's fury with his former friends for he scowled, gray eyes darkening into storm clouds. "No, she's not, Azula." His voice was as close to an order as he had ever said to her. "And no, neither of you are. I am going alone and that's final." She sighed aloud as she realized that all of the coaxing work that she had achieved beforehand just disintegrated like rocks under an Earthbender's fury because she had pushed him too hard.

Knowing that Aang's Earthbender within him was shining through, Azula decided to try a different approach instead. "I know that you are furious with them, I truly do, but you don't hold much anger towards Toph, do you?" At his incredulous look, she amended her words. "Okay, you're angry at Toph, and you have every right to be, but isn't the anger that you feel towards her less than the fury you feel towards the others, the peasants?"

"I suppose," he said quietly.

"See? Just take her with us and, maybe, you'll have the chance to begin to reconcile with her." She paused and added hesitantly, "I know that you miss them deep down," it was like her feelings towards Mai and Ty Lee.

Aang stared at her critically, gray eyes unreadable. Azula met his stare evenly, refusing to be cowed and eventually, he chuckled. "Very well, Azula, but only her. You're quite the charmer, too, you know?"

"What can I say? It's a gift, one that you possess, as well." She smirked up at him, abiding by his words, knowing that any of the others, especially the peasants, would get in the way if they came, and plus, Zuzu needed all of the help that he could get.

"So, with that apparently resolved, why aren't you asleep?" Aang asked.

Azula smiled at him innocently, "I missed you," she replied sweetly, knowing that there was a lot more truth in that statement – confession – than she wanted to admit. Upon seeing his raised eyebrow, she sighed. "There are too many memories here," she whispered quietly.

He nodded and placed his hand on her shoulder, "You know, it's okay to feel unsettled," he said gently.

She wanted to snap at him, but she didn't have the energy, suddenly feeling severe bouts of exhaustion. "Not everyone believes that, Aang."

He didn't look surprised by her words and gestured behind him. "We can reinstate our arrangement, if you want. How about it?"

Azula looked at him in disbelief, "Really? You want to sleep on the floor?"

Aang laughed, "I wasn't going to sleep anyways. Like I said earlier, sleepless nights are familiar to me. The bed is all yours."

She refused to name the feelings that bubbled within her at his suggestion. "Thank you, Aang," she whispered. "You're a good man,"

"I'm aware," he said with a straight face and pulled her to the bed, not even seeming to understand that the moment between them was… intimate.

Azula fell onto the blankets with a relieved sigh; she was a lot more tired than she had thought. Looking over at Aang, who was now sitting near her in the Lotus Position, she managed to infuse a warning in her words. "You know that if you run off to Ba Sing Se without me in the middle of the night, I'll shoot you with lightning, right?"
Aang laughed, glancing back at her, "I would expect nothing less, don't worry. I will leave with you and Toph tomorrow for Ba Sing Se. Goodnight, Azula."

Feeling nervous by the way his soft eyes stared at her, and the emotions that were brimming inside her, she smirked at him. "With me here, Avatar, it definitely is."

Sleep was beckoning her and the last thing she saw was Aang meditating, his presence more soothing to her than anything that she had ever experienced.

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His airbending alerted him when Azula's breathing evened out and he knew that she had finally fallen asleep. Risking a glance, Aang stared at her, unable to look away from the smooth expanse of her skin. He had always known that Azula was strikingly beautiful and attractive, exotic in many aspects, but lately, especially since they had spoken with Avatar Kirku days ago, he had begun to realize how utterly stunning and alluring she truly was. His gray eyes roamed over her body, and he wondered.

After several moments of observing her peaceful, lovely features, he shook his head and focused on his breathing, closing his eyes. His mind calmed as he dove into the deepest depths of his soul, searching. He had decided after the disaster that was the 'meal', that he would finally summon Avatar Wan forward. He needed to know what his first incarnation thought about the situation. Traveling past dozens of Avatars, past Kirku, he went as far as he possibly could.

A man appeared before him with shaggy black hair and smiled at him, "Hello, Avatar Aang, I am Avatar Wan."

He nodded his head in greeting.

Aang smiled back, observing the man who had become the first Avatar, who had, by the world's standards, ascended to godhood. "I'm sure that you already know why I summoned you, Avatar Wan."

Wan's easy smile slipped away from his face until his features were smooth. "Yes, Avatar Aang, Vaatu has, somehow, escaped from his prison, the Tree of Time."

"And do you have any ideas, any theories as to how he had escaped?" Aang asked almost desperately. "Anything that you think might help, I would be grateful to hear."

His past life frowned, ethereal fists clenching, the action felt in Aang's soul. "Vaatu could never escape on his own, this much I do know. He would need help, and not just anyone's, an immensely powerful being's aid."

Nodding his head in agreement, for he had pretty much said as much earlier. "So, a spirit must have helped him, then."

He concluded, "But who would be foolish enough to inveigle themselves in Vaatu's clutches."

"Yes, but, to my shame, Avatar Aang, I don't know which spirit was foolish enough to covet chaos and darkness unleashed." Wan shrugged in defeat.

Aang didn't know either, but he imagined that Vaatu must have been in contact with the spirit for a long time. "So, I'll need to imprison him again in the Tree of Time, correct?"

Wan nodded, "Yes, that would be ideal, but it is highly unlikely that Vaatu would fall for that trap again."

"I will have to destroy him from existence, then, won't I?"
"You cannot destroy him, Avatar Aang. Raava and Vaatu cannot exist without the other. They cannot permanently destroy each other, as whoever is defeated would eventually regenerate inside the other, reforming like Yin and Yang because a small piece of each is inside the other. Light and Darkness cannot exist by themselves – they both need each other like fire needs air."

"So, the only option is to put him inside the Tree of Time again," he observed.

"Yes, but like I already said, that would be practically impossible to do again. The Harmonic Convergence is coming, Avatar Aang. You will need to face Vaatu and defeat him, lest darkness and chaos molest both Realms for ten-thousand years." Wan said seriously.

"I know," he whispered sadly.

Wan smiled at him, "Good luck, Avatar Aang, I know that if anyone could deal with Vaatu, it is you; you are stronger than you know, my friend." He dispersed into Aang's body.

Aang closed his eyes in defeat, knowing that there would be no way that he'd be able to sleep tonight, especially since the Gaang was in the palace.

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Tell me what you think and leave a comment. I'd really appreciate it.

**Azula fully opens up to Aang and reveals quite a lot. We all knew that Iroh was a different man before Lu Ten died, as shown in the episode Zuko Alone. If you remember, he had written a letter to Ursa about his siege on Ba Sing Se – "I hope you all may see it someday, if we don't burn it to the ground first!" And he was shown laughing when he wrote that. That little scene actually reveals quite a bit about Iroh's former personality and based on the little tidbits we were fed in the show, I think that he was honestly feared through the entire Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes. And I know that it says in Canon that Sozin, Azulon, and Ozai were the ones who had all tried and failed to find the Avatar, but to me, at least for this story, that doesn't make sense. Azulon hated Ozai and would never send him off for a chance for his second son to receive glory, and plus, Iroh was the one who traveled all over the world. It was shown that he knew the Air Temples, so he must have been there before, decades before Zuko, trying to find the missing Avatar, too.

Yes, I don't think that Ozai was a prodigy-like character as Azula was – and Aang, too. We know that Azulon was a prodigy and I'm pretty sure that Iroh would be classified as such, as well. But Ozai was a late-bloomer just as Zuko – like father like son. And Ursa, who in this story, is a Firebender, and she was a prodigy. Ozai loved her so fiercely because she was everything that he wanted to be, at least in firebending.

**Some OC Avatars! I find the idea of the Avatar fascinating, so I intend to have Aang utilize his past lives a lot more than in Canon, especially when it concerns how Korra hardly ever communicated with her past lives, which then, as we all know, led to the end of the Avatar Cycle. Suffice to say, that won't happen in this story.

Okay, about the life-spans for Avatars, and everyone else. We all know in Canon that Avatar Kyoshi lived for over two hundred years, and I believe that this is because of chi. A bender has more chi than a non-bender, and the Avatar has more chi than anyone. This story, after much thought, will set the narrative around each Avatar Cycle, especially because Vaatu is involved, which is then about one-thousand years, a millennium. So, each
Avatar lives, on average, two-hundred-fifty years, which if you remember, is quite close to how old Kyoshi was when Canon declares that she died. Just as I mentioned, I plan to use the Legend of Korra timeline, at least sort of, so the Avatar's existence begins ten-thousand years ago, so there is only about forty Avatars total in the Avatar Cycle thus far. They live a long time, indeed, and it makes sense because of how Avatar: The Last Airbender treated the Avatar.

**Aang is quite callous and rude to the Gaang, but can you expect anything less? In this story, they had selfishly abandoned him, a twelve-year-old child, who was completely alone in the world. Now, he is twenty-years-old, a man. Suffice to say, a lot of anger and bitterness have swelled in his heart. And it makes sense that Katara and Sokka – and I suppose Suki and Toph – would fall back into the roles that they had played in the Great War. But the only problem now is that Aang refuses to do that. He is no longer that naïve, bubbly-eyed kid. His heart has hardened after all of the emotional scarrings he's suffered and frankly, I think that he's a lot better off than he could be.

Also, I do know that Azula might seem a little strange, but I disagree. She's finding who she is without Ozai's shadow ever-present. She was never a sadistic person, to begin with. I've read comments and stories where people toss around the word 'sadistic' blindly and declare Azula a sadistic monster, but she actually isn't one, not even a little if you actually think about it. There is no evidence from Canon that shows her taking pleasure in seeing people getting physically hurt (the smirk after shooting Aang in Ba Sing Se, I think, comes from the fact that she had triumphed over the Fire Nation's biggest threat to world domination.) and we've never seen her harming innocent people – until her mind broke, that is, and that's a **major** difference.

Remember Bosco, King Kuei's pet bear? Azula – and what I think that most people would do in the situation – could have imprisoned the bear in a cage, or even killed the animal as a sacrifice for Agni, but instead, she ordered Mai and Ty Lee to guard Bosco. And in The Boiling Rock episode, she stopped the warden, Mai's uncle, from torturing an innocent man. I mean, if she was actually sadistic, then she wouldn't have cared about that man and let the warden torture him, but she didn't. Instead, Azula only needed to listen to the guy's explanation and when she realized that he was telling the truth, she inadvertently saved him from being fruitlessly tortured by the warden.

And the most infamous example behind people declaring Azula sadistic: the scene in Zuko's flashback during Zuko Alone. First of all, it was Zuko who had harmed the Turtle Duck by throwing the rock, not Azula. His exact words were: "Hey, mom, want to see how Azula feeds Turtle Ducks?" And then, without waiting for an answer, he whips a rock at the Turtle Duck without hesitation. If you truly delve into the context of the scene, it can then be inferred that Azula did actually feed the Turtle Ducks but by throwing pieces of bread at it, but not with a rock like Zuko had so cruelly done. So, since Ursa didn't know that Azula threw pieces of bread for the Turtle Ducks to feed on, based on her reaction to Zuko's rock-throwing-incident, it is deftly clarified that Azula fed the Turtle Ducks when her mother wasn't there. (I read all of this somewhere, but I can't remember where it was. I didn't come up with it. Someone else did.)

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