Shattered Expectations

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Summary

She is none of the things Azula expected her daughter to be, and she will not do the things Azula wanted her to do, but Azula cannot imagine being so captivated by another person.

A drabble series about Azula and Ty Lee as they raise their daughter.

Notes

Welcome to my first ever drabble series! All installments will take place in the same universe. Installments will not be chronological.

Also, please note that I am posting the first seven chapters here unedited from the form in which they were originally published a year and a half ago (aka, they’re probably not representative of my current writing style).

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Shattered Expectations

Her daughter collects glass figurines. It is a true noblewoman's hobby that Azula's mother would be pleased with, and it is exactly the last thing Azula expected any child of hers to do.

"This one is a flutter bat," Shinzei says as Azula watches her rearrange her collection for what has to be the hundredth time this year, as if the Fire Lord's first advisor could not figure out what animal it was on her own. "He's my favorite," her daughter continues as Azula forces herself to be interested in opinions about the glass animals that Shinzei has shared with her dozens of times before. "His name is Lord Fluttery."

So it is not a very creative name. So her daughter is six. Still, Azula has to marvel at the how delicately the child handles such fragile objects that are small enough to fit in the palm of her tiny hand. At six years old, Azula would have lit them in flame to watch them burst. However, Shinzei seems entirely nonplused about her bending, though she is extremely talented. She complains that the flames hurt her eyes and the heat makes her feel like she is melting, and if she is forced to bend for too long, she collapses on the ground and pulls the collar of her shirt over her eyes, and she is too tired to do anything else for the rest of the day. It is frustrating to Azula. If she was more enthusiastic, the Princess might consider grooming her to seize the throne after Zuko leaves it to his own nonbending daughter. Surely the people of the Fire Nation would rather follow a firebending prodigy who could lead them into battle herself than an academic. But all Shinzei seems to care about are the little glass animals that line her windowsills and cover her shelves.

"I can see why you like him," Azula replies as her daughter replaces the flutter bat on the windowsill, though it is impossible to tell if the little girl is even waiting for a response. She has hardly looked at Azula since this mostly one-sided conversation began. She keeps her back turned and holds up her animals to show them to her mother over her shoulder, and when she does turn around, her eyes dart around the room. To the wood floor, to the silk canopy of the bed, never to Azula. That is just the way she is. "He's very colorful."

"He's very colorful," Shinzei repeats approvingly. "Mother, did you know that the first known glass animal was poured by a man named Songfeng near Gaoling seven hundred and forty-three years ago? He made a koalaotter for his daughter, who was sick with pig chicken pox. After that, everyone wanted glass animals from him. He even made one of a polar leopard for Avatar Kotaq to remind him of home. And Avatar Kotaq gave it to his son, and it might even still be around today."

Azula did know all of this because it is nearly word for word out of a book that she and Ty Lee gave Shinzei for her most recent birthday, and Shinzei has been spouting trivia from it ever since, but she is trying to be supportive of her daughter's interests—or interest—even if it is something Azula would rather it not be, the way her parents never were for her, so she simply nods and says, "That's right, Shinzei."

But Shinzei does not seem to be listening. Azula was once bothered by the way she or Ty Lee would tell their daughter something and she would fail to even acknowledge their presence in the room. Azula even called a specialist all the way from Republic City to examine her hearing when she was four, but he had finished the exam looking mildly perplexed but ultimately unconcerned. "I don't know what to tell you," he had told her with a shrug. "She hears everything you're saying. She just doesn't feel the need to respond."

"That's just the way she is," Ty Lee had insisted. Azula would take it personally, as a sign that she is already failing as a parent, but it is difficult to ignore that Shinzei does it to everyone.
"And this is Mr. Long Nose," little girl tells her, picking up a glass camelephant toward the back of the battalion of animals.

"Not Lord Long Nose?" Azula asks, raising her eyebrows as a smirk plays at her lips, though Shinzei's back is still turned.

"Of course not," Shinzei replies, as if that is the stupidest idea she has ever heard and Azula should have known better than to even ask. "There are no lords in the Earth Kingdom."

"How silly of me," Azula mutters.

"How silly of me," Shinzei agrees. She pauses, and Azula is sure she is biting her lips, the way she often does before she speaks, as she tries to formulate the right combination of words.

"Mother, did you know that there's a woman named Dora in Sho Jing Village, and for the past three hundred and seventy years, she and her ancestors have made a glass dragon for the coronation of every Fire Lord? The tradition started when her great, great, great, great," Shinzei pauses to take a breath, "great, great, lots of greats, grandmother, Jinaru, made one for Fire Lord Kashiko when she was only seventeen, and then when she died, her son took over. Isn't that cool, Mother? I think our family should start something like that."

"We have," Azula reminds her, wondering briefly if she was Fire Lord long enough to have her own dragon. Zuko has one, no doubt. It is probably blue or some color equally unbefitting the ruler of a nation of firebenders. "The royal throne of the Fire Nation."

"But that doesn't count," Shinzei informs her. "I won't pass that down. Izumi will." She says it matter-of-factly, and Azula gets the impression that, as much as it bothers her that her grandchildren will be mere nobility with little chance of ever inheriting the throne, Shinzei does not mind at all. "I meant me and you and Mom should start something. Something with glass animals." She carefully replaces the camelephant.

"What are you guys up to in here?"

When Azula turns, Ty Lee is leaning against the doorframe, the pink floral bag that she always carries into town when she goes shopping dangling from one shoulder. Shinzei does not look up from her collection.

"We're discussing starting a glass animal tradition," Azula mutters, eying her daughter's back carefully. They both have a hard time saying no to her, but Agni help them, if she demands that they all learn how to pour glass, Azula will have to draw the line.

"That sounds fun," Ty Lee comments absently as she pushes herself from the doorway and joins Azula where she is sitting on Shinzei's bed. "I stopped at the market."

"I see that." Azula peers down at the bag. At the windowsill, Shinzei is still selecting her next animal, even though Azula and Ty Lee both know she will pick the turtle duck. She always introduces them in the same order. "Did you get anything we actually need." Sometimes Azula swears that Ty Lee only married her for her money and influence, or what is left of it.

"Oh, you know," Ty Lee hums. "Just some odds and ends. Some perfume, a new sleeping robe, a present for Shinzei—"

"What?" the little girl squeals. Her sleek, black hair brushes the front row of animals as she whirls around. "You brought me a present?"

Ty Lee gasps and covers her mouth in mock horror. "You weren't supposed to hear that!"
"Well, I did." Shinzei moans as she tugs at Ty Lee's pink, silk robes. "Come on, Mom."

"Okay, okay," Ty Lee holds up a hand to calm her as she reaches into her bag. "It's in here somewhere… aha!" She retracts her hand and opens her fist, revealing an eagle hawk. It is dotted with red and gold speckles that reflect colored light through the otherwise clear glass. Shinzei's eyes light up and she flaps her hands and bounces up and down on the balls of her feet for a moment before reaching out and taking it, her face breaking into a wide grin. As she climbs onto the bed and then drops into Azula's lap to examine it, the Princess and her wife smile at each other.

It is hard to resist bringing Shinzei glass animals or books about glass animals when they pass stalls that sell them. It is rare that she gets so excited. She is usually a rather un-emotive child, and she seems bored by almost everything except her collection. Azula thinks that Shinzei is happy, but they do not often get to see her express it.

She is holding the figurine up to her face with one bright, golden eye closed, and focusing and unfocusing the other. They do not know why their daughter does half of the things she does, but that is just who she is.

Azula used to want a daughter whom she could teach to bend lightning, and Ty Lee used to want a daughter whom she could teach to cartwheel and flip. When Azula was pregnant, they talked about those things, but Shinzei will never do any of them. She is too sensitive to firebend, and her gross motor skills leave something to be desired. Sometimes Azula catches Ty Lee watching Mai apply makeup to Izumi's face as they chat about the boys that Izumi is just starting to notice, and she wonders why she could not give her wife the child that she wanted. Sometimes when they argue about having another baby, Azula words that Ty Lee is wondering that too.

"Is Shinzei not enough for you?" is the first thing Azula always asks, even though she knows Ty Lee loves their daughter every bit as much as she does.

"Of course she is," Ty Lee replies, offended. "But I want her to grow up with brothers and sisters to play with. Izumi is going to start spending a lot of time in lessons and meetings really soon, and I don't want her to be lonely."

"She's not lonely," Azula argues. "Look at her. She has her animals. In case you haven't noticed, she won't play with any of the other children we invite over. She doesn't seem to care about having friends. If we have another baby, the only difference will be that we will have two only children instead of one. And I don't want her to think she isn't good enough for us."

"Shinzei won't think that, Azula," Ty Lee answers. "She knows we love her. Not all younger children are born to replace their older siblings."

But the fighting never goes anywhere, and they are both beginning to doubt that it ever will. Azula still sometimes catches herself wishing she had a daughter that she could connect with the way that Mai connects with Izumi, a daughter whom she could imagine seeing on the throne one day, but Shinzei is here and Azula cannot imagine loving anything as much as she loves her.

"Do you like it?" Ty Lee asks quietly. There are actual tears clouding her eyes as she watches her daughter's happiness.

"Do you like it?" Shinzei whispers back, still too fixated on the eagle hawk to string together words of her own.

"I like the colors," Azula comments as she rubs her hand up and down her daughter's back.
"Red glass was first used to make animals by a man named Akairo. He lived in a cabin near Fire Fountain City and made a line of over six hundred glass fire ferrets. Twenty-eight of them are in the culture museum there," Shinzei parrots from her book. "Gold glass was first used by a woman named Kuma to make a glass bear the size of a flour sack for Earth King Yu Kin. It's still in the palace in Ba Sing Se, and today it's worth enough to buy two airships."

"Is that so?" Azula replies. She wraps her arms around her daughter's body and buries a kiss in her hair. Shinzei does not respond.

She is not what either of them imagined their child would be. She is not fast or agile, and though her fire is powerful, she shunes it. She has no royal ambitions and her ability to focus is limited to only one incredibly trivial thing. But it is not trivial to her, and she is not trivial to Azula and Ty Lee and so they adapt. They bend so that Shinzei does not have to.

Expectations are fragile, like glass. Ty Lee's mother surely did not want a circus performer and Azula's mother surely did not want a war machine, and no one is what their parents expect them to be, but Shinzei is beautiful in her own ways. How she finds joy in such small, simple things. How her bright eyes droop when she gets tired at night, and how she wraps her arms around Azula's neck and her warm breath tickles Azula's ear as she carries her to the bath. She may not do all the things Azula and Ty Lee hoped she would do, but when Azula looks at her daughter, she cannot help but think that she is perfect.
Azula is having her afternoon tea in her office when her daughter arrives. Azula has never much cared for tea, but in her middle age, she finds that it relaxes her. The first advisor to the Fire Lord is not an easy job. It has never been, but Azula does not have the energy she once did, the energy to train from sunrise until lunch and then attend an all-day war meeting or to make her way across the Earth Kingdom in a matter of days or to stay up half the night when Shinzei was a baby and still do her job. When she began to have stress nightmares every other night after thirteen years of not waking up screaming more than once every few months, Ty Lee had pushed her to step down. Azula had, of course, vehemently refused, and they had compromised. Now Azula has to take a tea break with her wife twice a day and she is not allowed to work before sunrise or after dinner. She is only forty, but sometimes she feels much older.

"Mother," Shinzei is leaning on the door frame. She does not acknowledge Ty Lee's presence, but the retired acrobat takes no offence. That is just how Shinzei is. Polite greetings and pleasantries are utterly lost on her, years of etiquette lessons completely out the window. "I have a question."

"What is it, Shinzei?" Ty Lee asks, even though the statement was not addressed to her. She pats the cushion beside her, and Shinzei sits down. She is taller than Azula was at fifteen, and much less depressed and insane, but otherwise, the resemblance is striking.

She turns her head toward Ty Lee, but does not look at her, focusing instead on the table top. It almost reminds Azula of Zuko and the Avatar's little friend, that dirty little earthbender who heads up Republic City's police force and has two equally dirty earthbender daughters now. "What do you do when you like someone?"

Azula chokes on her tea. This is the last question she expected, and she cannot imagine why her daughter decided to come to her of all people for help in this area. When Shinzei has personal questions, which is rare because she does not often feel the need to talk about her feelings, she almost always brings them to Azula, who almost always redirects her to Ty Lee. She would have thought the girl would have learned that Azula is useless for these things by now. Even Zuko or his emotionally muted wife or equally romantically clueless daughter would have been better choices.

Ty Lee gasps, but she stifles it behind a hand, because Shinzei does not like it when she reacts too strongly. "Who is it?" Azula can hear her smile.

Their daughter's face reddens behind the sleek, black hair she refuses to tie up, no matter how many ribbons and barrettes Ty Lee buys her. Azula can see the corners of Ty Lee's mouth escape from behind her hand. This is the kind of conversation Ty Lee has been watching Mai have with Izumi for years, and though they have both long since resolved to stop comparing their daughter to her cousin or their parenting experience with Mai's, Azula knows that this is a conversation Ty Lee has been dreaming of having since Azula gave birth to a baby girl.

Shinzei's hand clenches and unclenches rapidly in her lap. She does not flap her hands anymore, not since a group of boys, barely into their teens, decided to throw rocks at her on Ember Island four summers ago. Not since she overheard a group of middle aged women whispering about the "mad princess," the "royal head case," how "crazy breeds crazy," on the streets of the Caldera. Zuko's reputation as the kindly Fire Lord has not always been an asset. If it was up to Azula, all of those people would be imprisoned. But it is not up to Azula, and now Shinzei has adapted the hand-flapping into smaller, less noticeable motions.

Their daughter often struggles with words when she is worked up, but she finally manages to
open her mouth and make something come out. "It's Kya."

"Aww," Ty Lee sighs. She is smiling unabashedly now, and seems entirely overjoyed by the fact that their daughter has a crush on a waterbender, the daughter of the Avatar of all people. "That's so cute! Isn't it cute, Azula?"

"It is not cute," Sinzei replies angrily. "It's real and it's painful." Every once in a while, Azula does see herself in her, beyond just the appearance.

Ty Lee frowns. "I'm sorry. I just meant the two of you would make a really cute couple," she rephrases. Azula supposes that Shinzei could do worse. At least Aang and Katara have always treated her better than any of the parents of the girls at the Royal Fire Academy, who either talk to her like she is ten years younger than she is or who avoid her like they might spontaneously catch fire if they get too close, and encourage their children to do the same. At least Aang and Katara have never wondered aloud if she was human enough to count as a person before she was even out of earshot. If Azula was Fire Lord, forget imprisonment. All those people would be dead.

And at least they all know that Kya likes girls. Everyone has known that since she was about four years old. That is more than Azula can say for Ty Lee as a child.

"So what do you like about her?" Ty Lee rests her chin on her fists and leans forward in anticipation. Shinzei's face grows even redder. She looks extremely uncomfortable, but Azula supposes that all children have to experience that with their mother at some point. All children who have mothers, that is.

"What do you like about her?" Shinzei repeats. She drops her head and shakes her hair into her face to hide her blush. "I don't know."

"Come on, there have to be reasons," Ty Lee prods. "I know you don't like to talk about this stuff, Shinzei, but I'm your mom and I like to know what's going on with you."

Shinzei shrugs, but then she begins to answer. "She brought me a glass tiger seal from the South Pole last time she came to visit," she explains quietly, "and she's always nice to me, and one time she held my hand and I… liked it."

Azula cannot help but smile because everything about that answer has her daughter's name written all over it. Her daughter who, even when she got older and wanted to make friends, found she could not, her daughter who will sometimes touch other people but can hardly stand it when someone else touches her, and her daughter, who still values her collection more than anything else in the world.

"That… sounds nice, Shinzei," Azula answers, speaking for the first time since her daughter entered the room. She still has not decided if she can bring herself to support this relationship, but she cannot deny that Kya treats Shinzei exactly the way she deserves to be treated.

"But what do I do?" the teenager groans. "Help me, Mother."

And suddenly, Azula knows exactly why Shinzei came to her about this. It is because she has a crush on her friend that she wants to turn into more, and her mothers were once in the same position. It is because she assumed that Azula seduced Ty Lee.

"Tell her that, as Princess of the Fire Nation, you command her to date you at once," she advises. Her wife raises an eyebrow at her. Shinzei merely looks confused.

"Did that really work for you?" she asks.
"No, don't do that," Ty Lee advises her. She rests an arm across her daughter's shoulders, but Shinzei tenses visibly and she pulls away. Ty Lee still struggles with the lack of touching sometimes. She likes to show her affection physically, and Azula knows that it pains her to not be able to give their daughter a hug. "Okay, Shinzei, what I'm telling you might surprise you, but I actually made the first move on your mother."

"What?" Shinzei gasps. Azula cannot believe that Ty Lee has not told her this story at least a dozen times before. Perhaps it is because Shinzei has never shown any interest in romance up until now. Perhaps they both made the mistake of assuming that because she did not talk to them about it, she was not interested. In hindsight, it seems like a ridiculous assumption to have made, given how short the list of things Shinzei does talk about is.

"Mmhm," Ty Lee nods. "I wasn't even sure if she liked me, but I just couldn't hold it in anymore, you know? I had to kiss her. I don't even think we'd ever held hands." She looks to her wife for conformation.

"We hadn't," Azula replies. "I was intent on keeping my feelings to myself. I was preparing to be Fire Lord. I needed to look strong."

"Well, one night when we were in Ba Sing Se during the war, I came to her room after your aunt was asleep and I told her I had to tell her something, and I was going to ask her out, but then I decided it would be faster to just kiss her instead," Ty Lee completes the story all in one breath. It is a little more complicated than that, but Azula does not think that Shinzei is aware of her teenage breakdown and how exceedingly difficult the first few post-comet years were for her, and she would rather keep it that way.

"So I should just kiss her?" Shinzei asks. She is not much more expressive than Mai, but her eyebrows at tilted slightly upward, and Azula can tell that she is confused.

"Only if you think she likes you back," Ty Lee advises. "Do you?"

"I don't know," Shinzei answers hopelessly. Of course she does not.

"I think she likes you back," Ty Lee tells her almost conspiratorially. "Maybe next time she comes to visit you could ask her if she wants to go for a walk in the garden. Maybe you could hold her hand. Who knows what could happen."

"But I don't like the garden," Shinzei argues. "It's outside."

"But it's so romantic." Ty Lee sighs, and then she seems to remember who she is talking to. "Or maybe you might have a better time in the... the library or something."

"The library?" Azula repeats. "Oh yes, that's a prime location for a hot date. I'm shocked I didn't think to take you there in our youth. Honestly, Shinzei, if you really want to date her, all you have to do is let her know that you're open to it. If I know your water peasant friend—and I don't, but I know her parents—she'll have no problem with making the first move."

Ty Lee crosses her arms. "Oh, and I'm guessing you're going to claim that that was your plan all along now? That you somehow manipulated me into kissing you first because you kissing me would have made you look weak?"

Azula does consider insisting that that is exactly what happened, but then she looks at Ty Lee and at their daughter and she decides against it. "Well it would have. What if you hadn't returned my affections. Actually, though, you took me completely by surprise." She picks at her nail. "I didn't want a relationship at all, but you were, hm... persuasive."
Ty Lee smiles and reaches around the corner of the table to rest a hand on her wife's knee. "Just smile at her," she instructs Shinzei. "Try to stand close to her. I bet she'll get the message."

"So, you mean, Izumi was wrong when she said royalty always has to make the first move?" The panic in Shinzei's eyes is dulling. "She said trying to seduce a member of the royal family was a crime punishable by a long term of imprisonment."

Azula scoffs. "You went to my brother's daughter for advice about this?" she asks. "Because she's so romantically adept. She's had what, one courtship? It lasted a week? Two?" She shakes her head. "Think about that for a moment, Shinzei. That would mean your uncle asked out your aunt. Does that seem likely to you?"

Shinzei still looks confused, but Ty Lee smiles and shakes her head. "Shinzei, your cousin knows you don't know as much about Fire Nation laws and customs as she does, and she likes to mess with you. No, you definitely don't have to make the first move if you don't want to. I promise you, Kya won't be arrested if she does it instead."

"She won't think I'm pathetic or something if I wait?" she presses.

"Do I look pathetic to you?" Azula mutters under her breath, but Ty Lee ignores her.

"No, Shinzei, it won't," she answers. "But listen, if you're really that worried about it, maybe you could write her a letter. You're such a talented writer. I'm sure you could get your feelings across that way. Your mother would be happy to deliver it for you next time she sees the Avatar."

Shinzei glances sidelong at Azula. "You mean she won't read it?"

"She promises not to read it," Ty Lee replies, shooting her a stern warning look.

Shinzei wrinkles her brow and stares off to the side as she considers it. "Okay," she answers slowly. "Maybe I'll do that."

"Good." Ty Lee beams at her. "Do you want some tea?"

"No," their daughter answers shortly. She stands up and leaves the room without another word, as she often does when she has the information she came for. Ty Lee looks back at Azula and raises her eyebrows.

"Well, that was… something," Azula comments.

"I'm so excited!" Ty Lee squeals. "Azula, if she writes Kya a letter, you are not going to read it. You know how trusting she is."

"I would never use our daughter's condition against her," Azula snaps. It is exactly the kind of callous and manipulative thing her father would do, and she resents that Ty Lee thinks she would stoop to that level. "You're only this invested because she is finally interested in something you want her to be interested in."

"So I'm excited that I have something to talk about with my daughter," Ty Lee fires back. Then she sighs and shakes her head. "We both love her. We both only want what's best for her." She removes her hand from Azula's knee and sips her now room-temperature tea. "It's just hard to know what that is sometimes, and we both think we know, but we can never be sure."

Long gone are the days when they argued about the possibility of another baby. Long gone are the days when they still held expectations about what Shinzei's life would be like. Instead, Azula and Ty Lee have spent years swimming in the dark, raising a child with significantly different
needs with no reference point, but, as Azula stares at the doorway through which Shinzei disappeared, she thinks they have done a remarkably decent job, even measured against her own high standards. It is difficult to believe that she will be sixteen next year.

As if she read Azula's mind, Ty Lee speaks again. "She's really growing up, isn't she?" The Princess nods and mumbles an agreement. "Azula, what if we had another one?"

"Haha," the Princess says dryly as Ty Lee falls into a fit of hysterical giggles, sloshing her tea all over her saucer.
On Shinzei's twelfth birthday, the palace is silent.

Ozai used to throw gala's on Azula's birthday. All of the noble families attended and she was always the center of attention. Everyone wanted to be near her. Those evenings are some of Azula's fonder memories of her childhood. She can remember hiding under tables with Mai and Ty Lee pretending to be soldier in enemy territory on her seventh birthday. She can remember dancing with Ty Lee, holding each other too close to only be friends, on her thirteenth.

The common children were taught in school that dancing was evil, a frivolous distraction from what needed to be done. But in the Caldera, among nobility, high generals, and the Fire Lord himself, they danced. It became like bending lightning, a hobby reserved for the upper class, and Azula can still remember how Ty Lee's hands felt on her waist that evening, how badly she wanted to kiss her.

Shinzei does not want to have a birthday party. Mai is jealous because Izumi's birthdays are always grand affairs that take weeks of preparation, and she has to have them because she is the Crown Princess. It is killing Ty Lee, because she absolutely delights in party planning and has probably been looking forward to Shinzei's birthday this year since Shinzei's birthday last year. It kills Azula for a different reason.

"Mother, do I have to have a birthday party?"

It is late at night, and Azula is not supposed to be working. In fact, she had assumed when her daughter appeared in the doorway that Ty Lee sent her to drag Azula from her office, but instead, she is just milling around, running her fingers across the spines of the volumes on the bookshelves, occasionally lingering on one when she likes how it feels.

"Royal birthdays have always been special occasions in the Fire Nation," Azula answers without really responding to the question. "Even your great-great-grandfather, Fire Lord Sozin, and his great-great-grandfather, Fire Lord Zofu, had balls thrown for them as children."

Shinzei's shoulders slump, but she continues to argue. "But I'm not a Fire Lord. Did Sozin's cousin also have to have a party?"

Azula sighs and lays down her fountain pen. "Why wouldn't you want to have a birthday party, Shinzei?"

"No one will come," she answers glumly. "The other kids don't like me. Izumi says they say things about me when I'm not there. Bad things. And sometimes they don't even wait until I'm not there."

She is still staring at the bookshelf on the wall to Azula's left, running one finger back and forth over the binding of Essays on Policy and Politics in Times of War. She does not seem particularly angry, like Azula would have been, or confused and hurt, like Ty Lee would have been. She just sounds resigned. Azula, on the other hand, is furious. She could point out that everyone will come because she is a princess and no one will want to waste an opportunity to rub elbows with the Royal Family, but she does not think she wants those awful peasant children or their obviously just as awful parents anywhere near the palace. It is bad enough that Zuko revoked the law instated by their father that made insulting royalty a crime. So she makes an executive decision that she may or may not actually have the authority to make.

"No, you don't have to have a birthday party."
"Good," Shinzei replies, and she leaves the room without so much as a thank you.

Azula did not thank people at that age either.

So Ty Lee suggests that they take their daughter out in the Caldera for a day instead. Her idea was probably dinner and a show and maybe a walk on the pier afterwards, but as soon as Ty Lee mentions going out to their daughter, her eyes light up.

"I want to go to the glass factory."

Ty Lee's mouth falls open. "That's… not…"

"It's your birthday," Azula interrupts. "If you want to go to the glass factory, that is what we'll do." She has had enough of parents imposing their own interests on their children for one lifetime, even if she knows that her wife does not mean to.

They arrive just after lunch at the large, dirty brick building. It is one of the old relics, from before the Caldera became a bustling metropolis, when the nation was made up almost entirely of peasants working on farms, and only those who could not afford their own land lived in city tenements and worked in industry. It is not located in a particularly savory part of town, and their palanquins stuck out like Azula's blue fire in the Earth Kingdom. Broken bottles litter the ground around them, and most of the surrounding buildings have cracked windows.

"That's Fire Lord Heinai," Azula tells her daughter as they pass by a statue in the front of the factory. "She ruled during the transition period when the bulk of our economy shifted from agriculture to production. She built dwellings that people actually wanted to live in and set a minimum wage so the younger children of farmers, who weren't going to inherit any land, would come to the city instead."

"Huh," is all Shinzei responds. She is not very interested in Fire Nation history, not the way Azula always has been, but she will one day be Izumi's first advisor, and it is a subject she needs to be familiar with.

The owner of the factory, a round man with a thick, grey mustache named Kanei, gives them a personal tour. It is… not as mind-numbing as Azula expected to find it, though the glass dust sends Ty Lee into a coughing fit twice, but Shinzei looks more excited than Azula thinks she has ever seen her about anything, and that is enough for both of them.

"Our master craftsmen have their own studios," he tells Shinzei as they leave the workroom floor, all of them sweating through their robes from the heat of the kilns in the Fire Nation summer, and climb down a narrow set of stairs into the basement. "They work below ground because it is cooler. The rooms on the third floor can be suffocating, especially at this time of year." Their footsteps echo through the silent hallway in a way that reminds Azula of the asylum she had the misfortune of living in for years. They stop at a doorway. "This is where Girazu works. He is the most talented glass blowers in the Fire Nation, and when I told him the Princess was coming for her birthday, he said he might want to make you something."

Girazu is a lean, middle-aged man with a whitening beard and well-muscled arms. He is working with something very small on the end of a pipe under a magnifying glass. He looks up when they enter the room.

"Ah," he smiles, "you must be the Princesses. And you must be Princess Shinzei." He kneels down her to level but, to Azula's relief, does not hold his hand out for her to shake. "They told me it was your birthday, and I was hoping you might stop by. I thought, if it's okay with you, I would make you a present."
"Make you a present," Shinzei agrees, flapping her hands and nodding her head eagerly. Beside Azula, Ty Lee smiles warmly.

Girazu pulls up a stool beside his table. "You can sit here and watch, but you have to promise not to touch anything. These tools can get very hot."

"Very hot," Shinzei repeats, still too excited to string together sentences of her own.

Girazu selects a thin stick of glass and holds it up to show her. "I hear you're a firebender. Would you mind heating this up for me?"

"Umm," Shinzei replies. She looks over her shoulder, in her mothers' direction, as her hands begin to twist in her lap.

"I'll do it," Azula announces. She steps forward and pushes her hand, balled into a fist, between Girazu and her daughter, and when she unfurls it, palm up, there is a small blue flame.

"Perfect," Girazu murmurs as he heats the glass. Shinzei leans away from the heat, but her eyes are still wide, avidly watching the glass blower's movements.

The glass swells under the fire until he removes it and brings it under the magnifying glass. "From here we have to work quickly," he tells Shinzei. "Before it cools."

He uses a pair of small metal tweezers to pull at the glass, forming legs and, eventually, claws, a paper-thin metal stick to draw a groove in the glass, forming the head, tweezers again for the mane, ears and snout, and then a pipe and bend the glass, making the animal's spin curve. He works for half an hour, and Shinzei watches him carefully the entire time. Finally, he breaks off what is left of the glass stick and holds it out to her.

"A dragon!" she exclaims.

The animal is standing on its hind legs, its jaws open, finely-crafted teeth visible. It is as gorgeous as anything Azula and Ty Lee have ever bought for her, and neither of them minds.

"They say that, once upon a time, the Royal Family used to have a dragon form, and twice a year, during the solar eclipse, they would transform and fly high over the Fire Nation with the sun. Of course, over the years, the Royal Family lost their ability to transform and became entirely human, and now, firebending is all that is left, but I imagine that, if you could turn into a dragon, this is what you would look like."

Shinzei holds the glass dragon up to her face and studies it.

"What do you say," Ty Lee prods her after a moment.

"Thank you," Shinzei murmurs, still completely enthralled with her gift.

"Yes, thank you," Ty Lee tells him significantly as she holds her hand out for him to shake. "People aren't always…" she trails off as she glances at her daughter. "They just don't always understand her."

"You know, she reminds me of my grandson, Ran," Girazu says. "Though I wish he was as interesting in glass blowing. All he seems to talk about are grasshoppers."

Shinzei does not stop staring at the dragon until they arrive back at the palace. "What are you going to name it?" Azula asks her as they enter the grand foyer.
"Shinzei, of course," she mutters. "Girazu said it was me in my dragon form. I'm going to go show it to Izumi." She does not give them a backward glance as she runs off through the halls.

Azula feels Ty Lee's arm curl around her waist as they watch their daughter's retreating back. "I think she had a pretty good time."

Azula smirks. "And you wanted to throw her a party."

The acrobat sighs. "It would have been awful for her. I admit it." She leans her head against her wife's shoulder and Azula toys with her hair.

"I'm sure Mai will let you plan Izumi's birthday party next year. You know she hates it," she suggests, but Ty Lee shakes her head.

"It's not the same. I mean, I like seeing Izumi happy, of course, but I really just wanted to throw a party that would our daughter happy."

Azula rubs her back. "We did make our daughter happy. We gave her a birthday she'll remember for the rest of her life."

"Yeah," Ty Lee smiles feebly as Azula's lips touch her hair. "She knows we love her, right?"

"I know she does," Azula answers. Not just because they—mostly Ty Lee—have told Shinzei that many, many times, but because Azula spent most of her childhood completely devoid of love, and now that that is no longer the case, she can feel the difference. A person can sense being loved. Azula can feel it from her wife and her brother, and she can feel it from her daughter, whom some people claim when they think Azula is out of earshot, is not human enough to love. And if Azula can feel it, monster that she was raised to be, she knows that Shinzei, who is has never known war, who grew up in stability instead of destruction, and who has great power at her fingertips but will not harness it, simply because it is not worth it for how uncomfortable it makes her, must be able to feel it as well.
The room is completely dark when the door creaks open, not because it is nighttime—in fact, it is the middle of the afternoon—but because heavy, dark red curtains have been pulled across the windows. They make the room stiflingly hot, even though it is winter in the Fire Nation, but they are also necessary to block out the sun, which Ty Lee swears up and down shines more brightly here than anywhere else, despite the fact that Azula has never noticed.

The mattress dips as someone sits down on the edge of the bed behind Azula. She feels fingers against her cheek as the same person brushes damp hair away from her face. She wipes at her eyes furiously. No one should see her like this. She is not weepy over a child she had not even named yet.

"I brought you a cup of tea," Ty Lee tells her. "I was afraid you might overheat in here, so I let it cool down a lot, and now it's kind of… lukewarm." Azula hates tea. Ty Lee knows this. Unfortunately, it is what everyone drinks, except for, perhaps, the people in the Water Tribes, and Ty Lee's first impulse when anyone is upset is to make them tea. "I'm actually surprised this is affecting you so much. I mean, not that it's a bad thing," she rushes to add. "It just didn't seem like you were that excited about being a mother."

Azula takes a deep breath and does not like how she hears it shudder. "You're going to leave me, aren't you?"

"Azula…" Ty Lee gasps. "Of course not. Why would you even—I would have to be a terrible person to leave you over something like this."

The Princess shrugs carelessly. "Because this is the only thing you've ever asked for and I can't give it to you." She feels helpless. She has never felt so helpless and she loathes it. And she also feels completely inadequate, because she is trying as hard as she is and she cannot seem to do something that Mai did on accident.

"It's okay," Ty Lee assures her. "We can try again. Or we don't have to if you don't want to. Please don't tell me you only agreed to this pregnancy because I wanted it. Azula, you're enough for me."

"Of course I know that." Azula shakes her head and tries not to sniffle. "But I've never really had a family before. I want one with you."

Ty Lee leans down and presses her lips against her cheek and the Princess sighs.

"Does it still hurt?"

A nod.

"Still bleeding?"

Another nod.

There was so much blood. Azula is not squeamish, but agni, she cannot even think about it without wanting to vomit. Ty Lee walked in on her looking like she had barely survived an assassination attempt.

"Roll onto your stomach," Ty Lee instructs her, pushing gently on her shoulder.
"Why?" Azula groans. Her abdomen feels like it is being clawed apart from the inside and the absolute last thing she wants is to move.

"Just trust me," Ty Lee insists. So Azula flops onto her stomach with an unattractive grunt and Ty Lee climbs on the bed and straddles her thighs. She feels the bottom of her robe being flipped up past her waist, and then there is the steady pressure of her wife's hand against her tailbone. "Does that feel any better?"

"Mmm," Azula hums, her eyes fluttering closed. Her breath hitches. There is still pain, of course, but Ty Lee's manipulation of her pressure points greatly diminishes it. There are perks to being married to someone who talks endlessly about chi.

"Why aren't you upset?" Azula asks after moment, when she feels the pressure begin to subside as Ty Lee takes her weight off of her. "I thought you really wanted this."

There are lips against her spine, right above the hem of her underwear, and then Ty Lee pulls her robe back down over her hips. "What do you mean? Of course I'm upset," she replies. "I've been crying on Mai's shoulder all day. Don't tell me my face always looks this blotchy." She eases her head onto the pillow beside Azula's and rests a hand on the small of her back.

"I expected you to be in hysterics somewhere," the Princess admits. "But you seem just fine." Ty Lee feels everything, everything, more than anyone else Azula has ever met. She cannot be handling this better. That is completely impossible.

"Yeah, I think I had enough of hysterics this morning."

Azula's mouth twists as she remembers Ty Lee scooping her up in her arms as she sat doubled over in a pool of blood and running through the palace, screaming for Zuko and Mai and then nearly kicking their bedroom door down. The servants are probably still cleaning the floors. Adrenaline will do strange things to people.

"And," Ty Lee takes a deep breath. "I figured when I came in here to see you, I should try to hold myself together, since, you know, I'm not the one who miscarried a baby today." She slides her hand up to rub circles into Azula's shoulders.

It is odd to feel like she cannot trust her own body anymore. After all, that is the thing she has been valued for most of her life. Her body and the things that came with it. Destruction. Pleasure. But apparently not life.

"You could cry a little," she tells her wife. "Maybe then I wouldn't feel so pathetic."

"You mean it?" Ty Lee whispers, and Azula nods. The acrobat scoots towards her, her chin already beginning to wobble, and buries her face in her wife's chest. Normally, Azula hates it when Ty Lee cries in front of her, but today she welcomes it, because today she feels incredibly helpless and alone and Ty Lee is the only other person whom she knows understands that.

"We can try again," Azula repeats absently, as she strokes Ty Lee's heaving back.

"Are you sure," Ty Lee's voice is muffled against her. "I know you didn't do so well with the… making it part last time."

"Remember who you're talking to," she answers sharply. "I have commanded armies. I am not afraid of a single man."

She hears a wet giggle, and then Ty Lee withdraws her head and kisses Azula sloppily on the nose, getting tears everywhere, of course. "The next one will be perfect. I know it will," she says.
determinedly. "We'll have a baby with your eyes and my laugh and you can teach it firebending, and I can teach it how to flirt, and our lives will be just perfect."

"Your optimism is nauseating," Azula mutters. It is something she thinks would sound at home coming out of Mai's mouth. She knows that Ty Lee is probably right because Azula is prefect and can do anything, and if she does not feel that way, she at least needs to pretend, but right now she hurts and she is angry at herself, and she just wants to wallow for a few more hours before making herself presentable and pretending to be completely unbothered at dinner.

However, Ty Lee's plans for the future do seem rather appealing. A no doubt very attractive child with Azula's superior bending abilities and Ty Lee's sociability would be nearly unstoppable. Perhaps their child would even be popular enough among the people of the Fire Nation to lead a successful insurrection when the time was right.

She decides not to tell Ty Lee that she is considering grooming their hypothetical baby to eventually assassinate Mai and Zuko's daughter and her entire family. She has a feeling her wife would not be as enthused by the prospect as she is.

"Somebody has to look on the bright side." Ty Lee is running her fingers over Azula's lips now, tears still leaking from her eyes. "Besides," she shrugs. "I know I'm right. We have to be able to have a baby because we'd be such great parents. There's no way the universe would let that go to waste."

Azula thinks she is wrong on both counts, because people who definitely do not deserve children get them all the time and Azula is striving to become one of those people, but she opts not to ruin her wife's hope. Instead, she pulls Ty Lee back toward her and pretends it is for the other woman's comfort so she does not have to admit that it is for her own.

Ty Lee's hand curls delicately around her shoulder as Azula holds her. "Do you think it was a boy or a girl?"

"A boy, obviously," Azula replies without pausing to think about it. "Can you imagine us with a girl?"

"I kind of thought it was a girl," Ty Lee admits. "I just kind of have a feeling like we're supposed to have a daughter."

Azula scoffs. "Don't tell me you read its aura or met it in a dream or something."

"No," Ty Lee answers. "But you know how sometimes you just know things?" Another shrug. "I guess I just knew."

"Well only one of us can be right, and since I'm always right about everything, it's obviously me."

She can feel her wife smile against her, and it feels better than she would like to admit, like something warm running through her veins from the point where the acrobat's lips touch her skin. There is something empowering about knowing that, even in times like these, she can make Ty Lee smile.

Even if she was being completely serious.

"I love you, Azula," the acrobat whispers fiercely. "And I promise we'll be really happy no matter what, okay?"

"If you say so."
Azula wishes she could believe that.
"They're so cute together," Ty Lee coos.

Azula is crouched behind a pillar at the insistence of her wife, watching her daughter's date progress, and she feels strange about it. She remembers trying to stealthily court Ty Lee as a teenager after they returned from Ba Sing Se and how enraged she would have been if anyone had dared spy on them, but Ty Lee insists that "Shinzei is not the same person as you," and "she might need us," and "otherwise, we'll never know what happened."

It still feels like a violation of trust.

Shinzei is in the garden with Kya. They are loosely holding hands, and Shinzei keeps looking at her and then quickly looking away. Kya is much braver. She stares at the other girl and refuses to back down. She is the one who initiated their blossoming romance after all. Azula is still wary of the relationship. Kya is beautiful, of course. She is tall. She has brilliant blue eyes, smooth, dark skin that draws a dramatic contrast to Shinzei's own ivory skintone, and a defined musculature, much like Azula had when she was younger. And these features are only slightly undermined by the fact that she is a waterbender and that, even at sixteen years old, she is perennially barefoot.

"I'm just so excited. It's such an exciting time in her life, you know, Azula?" Ty Lee is bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, effortlessly maintaining her balance in her awkward crouched position, and even if Azula is still unsure how she feels about her daughter's choice in romantic partners, her enthusiasm is contagious.

"How should I know?" she answers. "I was locked in a mental hospital when I was sixteen."

She is really not still bitter about it.

Well, maybe a little. Those were supposed to be the best years of her life, after all.

"Shhh! Look at them!" Ty Lee slaps her lightly on the shoulder to quiet her. In the garden, Kya whispers something into Shinzei's ear. Their daughter continues to stare at the ground in front of her, but she smiles and nods. They watch as the girls make their way to the nearby fountain. Ty Lee's arm tightens around Azula's shoulders. The fountain is significant in their relationship too. During the war, Azula used to take Ty Lee there to make out when they grew tired of keeping their relationship confined to her stuffy bedroom. She can still remember the press of damp grass against the back of her thighs and the weight of her then-girlfriend on her lap, the combined fear and exhilaration that came with the possibility of being spotted.

Kya releases Shinzei's hand and falls into her waterbending from. As she draws a thick stream of water from the fountain, Shinzei watches, completely mesmerized, the way Ty Lee used to watch Azula firebend. It seems like some cruel trick of the fates that Azula's daughter hates firebending but is so enthralled with a waterbender. Azula might even question whether Shinzei was hers if she did not remember giving birth to her herself.

Kya bends the beginning and end of the water whip together, so that the water rotates in a circle between them. Then, with a few fluid motions of her hands, she twists it into the shape of a heart.

"Oh, that is so cute!" Ty Lee whispers. "Why didn't you ever do anything that romantic for me?"

"You knew what you were getting," Azula dismisses the question with a wave of her hand. "If you wanted romance, you should have married Zuko."
Ty Lee sighs. "She gets a heart made out of water, I get thrown in the Boiling Rock." But her arm does not leave Azula's shoulders.

"She probably gets it from her parents," Azula mutters darkly. "Have you seen them? They're disgustingly in love. In my family, not being banished for a stupid, teenage mistake was a show of love."

Ty Lee giggles. "No wonder you're so bad at it." Her lips brush Azula's cheek and edge toward her ear, and for a moment, Azula thinks she might be able to persuade her wife to take her to their bedroom and leave their daughter with some privacy, but then Ty Lee turns back to the garden, just as interested as ever.

Shinzei is clenching and unclenching her fists rapidly, bouncing up and down in glee. Kya puts the water down and waits, a calm, patient smile spread across her face. It reminds Azula of the way she used to look at Ty Lee, and she hates it because she does not want to like their relationship.

Shinzei eventually stills, and Azula thinks she reads a murmured apology on her lips, but Kya simply shakes her head and takes Shinzei's hand again.

"Did you ever think this would be happening to her?" Ty Lee asks as she drops her head to Azula's shoulder.

The honest answer is that Azula did not give it much thought. Where Ty Lee wanted Shinzei to date, Azula wanted her to firebend and dominate. "I knew she could," she replies slowly. "She just never seemed interested."

"You knew she could?" Ty Lee repeats, furrowing her brow in curiosity, and Azula nods.

"No one thought I was human enough to fall in love either," she explains. "All I needed was to find the person who knew that wasn't true. It's no different for her."

Ty Lee loves their daughter, but she has never understood Shinzei the way Azula has. Azula, who knows what it is like to never feel adequate, who understands the unique loneliness of being surrounded by people who are all made uncomfortable by her, who was once also believed to be a monster, even if it was a monster of a different kind.

Ty Lee lifts her head to kiss Azula on the lips before replacing it and holds her wife even more tightly that before. "Kya knows."

"I believe that." Even if she does not want to. "And neither of those people are who our parents wanted them to be."

"Hey, speak for yourself!" Ty Lee argues. "I've always loved Kya."

"You love everyone. That doesn't count," Azula insists.

But instead of responding, Ty Lee gasps and points frantically into the garden, where Kya is, slowly, giving Shinzei ample time to stop her, moving her hands to the other girl's waist and leaning in. When their lips meet, Shinzei stiffens, and Kya immediately pulls away, her cheeks growing pink. Ty Lee lets out a sigh of disappointment, but Shinzei is positively beaming, even if she is still staring at the ground between them. She rocks forward and pulls back, and then she leans forward again and kisses Kya back. Her hands hang in the air, not quite touching the waterbender's sides, but Kya's flatten against Shinzei's back and gently pull her closer.

"Azula!" Ty Lee gasps, squeezing her wife so tightly it is painful. "Azula!"
"I know, I know," Azula grumbles. "This is the best moment of your life. Now can we let them have the rest of day to themselves? This is what you dragged me here in the hopes of seeing, isn't it?"

"Ugh, fine," Ty Lee sighs. "Why can't you ever just let me enjoy anything?"

"Because our daughter deserves some privacy on her date," Azula hisses, picking herself up off the veranda and brushing off her robes.

"Some parents make their children take chaperones on their dates," Ty Lee huffs. "I am not that bad."

"Most parents are worried for their children’s safety if they let them wander the Caldera alone with strange boys," Azula points out. "Our daughter is with her friend and they have not left the palace grounds. You're just being nosey."

Ty Lee crosses her arms and looks annoyed, but she does not argue.

Shinzei comes to them after Kya rejoins the rest of her family in the guest wing of the palace. She smiles serenely in the doorway of the parlor where Azula and Ty Lee are seated on the couch, sipping tea and pretending they have been there for hours.

"Come sit," Ty Lee tells her, a wide smile stretched across her face as she pats the seat of the chair beside her. "Tell us all about your date."

Shinzei slips into the chair and reaches for the tea tray. "What do you want to know?"

"How was it? Did you take her to the garden like I told you too? What happened?" Questions flow from Ty Lee's mouth before her daughter has time to even digest them. Her eyes widen in a panic.

"How was it? Did you…" is her only response, and Azula thinks she is trying to communicate that she did not understand the questions that were being fired at her.

"Did it go well?" she asks, much more slowly, setting a hand on her wife's shoulder to pull her back.

"Yes," Shinzei answers simply as her cheeks redden.

"What did you guys do?" Ty Lee asks in a much more measured voice than before.

"We went to the garden," Shinzei tells them. "And we… talked." Her eyes light up. "She showed me a waterbending trick."

"Oh really?" Azula raises her eyebrows. "What kind of waterbending trick?"

"She made shapes out of the water." She notices that her daughter carefully avoids mentioning the heart. "I know you don't like that she's a waterbender, but I think it's beautiful. I wish firebending wasn't so awful. Or maybe I just wish I was a waterbender too."

"I used to feel the same way about your mother's firebending?" Ty Lee sighs. She smiles warmly at her wife. "Remember that, Azula?"

"Yes, you used to watch me avidly every time I trained," Azula replies, stirring her tea absently. "It was actually quite creepy."
"Hey!" Ty Lee slaps her in the shoulder and Azula narrowly avoids sloshing tea all over her lap. She turns back to her daughter. "Are you going to go out with her again?"

"Her family is going to be in town for the Fire Days Festival next month. We've agreed to go together."

Ty Lee pouts. "That's an awfully long time to wait. I know! You love climbing out on the roof and watching the stars. You should ask her if she wants to go with you. Your mother and I used to do that together when we were teenagers."

"Do you think she would like that?" Shinzei asks hopefully, and Ty Lee nods.

"We found it very romantic. Right Azula? We had a couple of firsts on that roof."

Azula grunts noncommittally and Shinzei wrinkles her nose. "I know you're excited that I... went on a date, but I don't need to know all those details. You're my parents."

"Okay," Ty Lee shrugs in mild disappointment. "Just trying to help."

And that night, a breeze blows through Shinzei's room from the open window, and Ty Lee and Azula exchange a knowing glance when Aang and Katara wonder aloud where their daughter has run off to.
They are in the marketplace in the Caldera when it happens the first time. Azula hates this place. It smells like animals and dirty water and there are so many people who gawk openly and try to press trinkets on her that she does not need or want, even if she does not have to pay for them.

Ty Lee, on the other hand, loves it. She is the reason they join Zuko every time he decides to make an appearance among the common people.

"Azula, look at this!" she calls. She is holding up a gold pocket watch engraved with a spindly flower with some difficulty, given the number of other new possessions her arms are laden with. "Isn't it pretty?"

Azula squints at it. "It's broken. It's not even ticking."

Ty Lee narrows her eyes for a moment and then shrugs. "Oh well, it's the looks that count."

The vendors love Shinzei and Izumi. Izumi is skipping along beside her mother wearing a new headdress that looks like the homemade version of what Ty Lee wore when they were married and Shinzei is eating fire flakes out of a paper bag, cinnamon stuck to her lips. Her fingers twitch rhythmically against the bag and she bounces on the balls of her feet with each step, but her eyes are getting less focused, and Azula thinks she might be hiding how tired she is. She is only four, after all. She cannot be expected to keep up with the adults and Izumi, even if Azula was at that age.

"Princess!" a middle-aged women crows. Izumi looks back hopefully, but the woman lunges at Shinzei, holding a raggedy stuffed koala sheep in front of her.

"No, take this one!" a young man with a patchy mustache falls to his knees on Shinzei's other side, waving a patched tigerdillo in front of her face. It is not uncommon for the vendors to compete for their attention. Mai and Izumi are regularly given choices they did not ask for. It happens to Ty Lee less often, but she revels in it when it does. It has never happened to Shinzei before because usually Ty Lee or one of the guards is carrying her, and Azula does not expect her to make much of it. She expects her to choose one, or perhaps grab both as Azula surely would have done, had her father allowed her to own peasant toys as a child.

What she does not expect is the scream that cuts through the crowd.

Shinzei is not a loud child. She did not even speak until a year and a half ago, but when Azula looks over, she is crouched on the ground, her hands pressed against her face, crying out like someone is holding a hot iron to her skin.

The guards are on the vendors within second, pulling them away, holding the rest of the crowd back. The stuffed koala sheep lies stranded on the street.

"Shinzei!" Ty Lee pushes the guards out of the way, falls to her knees, and attempts to wrap her daughter in her arms, but Shinzei only screams louder and rocks harder.

"She doesn't want to be touched!" Azula pulls her wife away. Ty Lee is in tears, and Azula tightens her arms around her waist as their daughter wails. Izumi clutches onto Mai's robe, her eyes wide. Zuko whispers something to a guard and he disappears into the now-silent crowd, probably to summon the royal physician.

Shinzei's screams begin to subside, making way for quiet sobs. Azula keep ahold of Ty Lee. She
Shinzei's screams begin to subside, making way for quiet sobs. Azula keep ahold of Ty Lee. She has stopped struggling, but Azula does not think it will help matters if she tries to jump on their daughter again. Ty Lee likes to give comfort through physical contact, but that is rarely what Shinzei wants and obviously not what she needs right now.

A break in the crowd forms, and a moment later, the guard appears with three others carrying a palanquin. Azula did not think it was possible for her brother to do something so right.

She lets go of Ty Lee, who now seems completely paralyzed, and crawls toward her daughter.


Shinzei's head snaps toward her, though her eye look over her right shoulder.

"Do you want to go home?"

Shinzei folds her hands in front of her body and nods.

"There's a palanquin here for you."

Shinzei glances behind her, but it takes her a moment to start to move, like she cannot remember how to work her body. She curls up inside the palanquin and Azula pulls the curtain closed behind her.

She holds her arm out for her wife. Ty Lee folds herself into Azula's side and they follow their daughter back to the palace on foot.

"Am I sick?" Shinzei asks them that night as Ty Lee tucks her into bed and Azula watches.

"The physician said there's nothing wrong with you," Ty Lee tells her. Their daughter has seemed better since they arrived back at the palace. Exhausted perhaps, but better. She is clutching the ratty stuffed koala otter that started this mess. Zuko picked it up and brought it back for her, very much against Azula's wishes, and now Shinzei does not want to let it go.

"It was scary," she whispers.

Ty Lee lies down next to her, careful to keep her distance, because even at her young age, Shinzei does not like to be touched unless she is the one who initiated it. Azula takes the seat that she vacated.

"Do you want to hear a secret?" Ty Lee asks, and Shinzei nods. "I was scared too."

"I was scared too." Shinzei's eyes widen in surprise. "Why?"

"Because I love you so much."

"Oh." Shinzei looks away and says nothing else. She has never returned Ty Lee's sentiment, or Azula's on the rare occasion that it comes from her, and she knows that it concerns her wife, but Azula very rarely utters those words herself. She knows that never telling a person you love them does not mean you don't.

"Do you feel okay now?" Ty Lee asks. She eases her body toward Shinzei but is careful not to touch her. Azula takes her wife's hand instead and Ty Lee smiles at her.

"I guess," Shinzei mutters.

"Are you tired?" Azula asks. "Do you want us to leave?"
The four-year-old nods. Azula is not good at parenting, but she is somehow not terrible at knowing what her daughter needs when she is distressed.

Azula stands up and leads her reluctant wife out of the room. "Do you think she'll be okay?" Ty Lee whispers as Azula closes the door behind them.

"You saw her. You heard the physician. She's fine."

"Azula, that's not what I mean." Ty Lee's voice pleads at her. "Do you think something happened to her or… something?"

"What could have possibly happened?" Azula asks. "You're with her all the time. It was a tantrum. She is four."

"It was not a tantrum, Azula!" Ty Lee cries. "Did you see that?" Her eyes are gathering moisture and her breaths are rapidly beginning to quicken. "This is our daughter! You can't just pretend nothing's wrong and hope it will go away!"

Azula sighs. "I know it wasn't a tantrum."

Ty Lee crosses her arms in confusion. "Well, then…"

Azula stops walking and leans back against the hallway wall. "I said that because I'm concerned."

"Well, so am I. That's what I'm trying to talk to you about—"

"I'm concerned that she got this from me," Azula mutters through clenched teeth. She does not meet Ty Lee's eyes. She does not look at her at all. She was so intent on giving birth to their child so that the blood of the Royal Family would run through her veins and because Ty Lee had already done so much for her, but in hindsight that all seems selfish when there was this sort of risk. Ty Lee has always been in perfect health and Azula spent five years barely hanging on to her sanity. "I'm concerned that the same thing that's wrong with me is wrong with her and it's because I was the one who had her."

"Oh, Azula," Ty Lee pulls her into a hug that Azula wants to pull out of so that Ty Lee will know she does not need to be comforted, but she is trapped between her wife's body and the wall. "I mean, sometimes you've had breakdowns like that, but only when you weren't okay to begin with. It's never been out of the blue like that. I'm sure it's not the same thing at all."

"But you don't know that," Azula insists. "And if it is the same thing, it's because of me. There's no other answer."

"Azula, this is not your fault, okay?" Ty Lee assures her. "We have a beautiful daughter. She's smart, she's very sweet, and what if she did have what you have? Look at you. Look how you turned out."

"After an adolescence of pain and misery," Azula mutters.

Ty Lee pulls back and brushes Azula's hair behind her ear. "But that was mostly because of you father, right? And all that pressure that was on you? And there's nothing like that in Shinzei's life." Ty Lee offers her a smile. "You made sure of that." She leans toward Azula again and brushes her lips against her cheek.

"She'll be okay," Azula replies firmly, more for her own assurance than Ty Lee's.

"I hope so." Ty Lee shrugs. "Maybe it was just a one-time thing. Maybe it won't ever happen
again."

The next time is five months later, at a pyrotechnic display on the beach on Ember Island.
Hey guys. I know it's been years since I updated this. I originally planned for 12 chapters, but I haven't written Tyzula since 2015 and I don't even have the list of what the other chapters were going to be about anymore, so I'm just posting the rest of the chapters that were already posted on ff.net and calling it a day. I literally copy and pasted. I haven't edited them or reread them at all.

I do remember that the last chapter was going to be Shinzai leaving with Kya, so just know that they're endgame.

To anyone who reads this, thanks for coming back years after the last update.

Ty Lee's hands clench against the back of Azula's head as Azula's lips close over her nipple and her hand works between her legs. Her heel trails down Azula's spine. She likes to curl around Azula when they have sex, and despite how it restricts her range of movement, Azula loves it. She loves the way it amplifies the small, jerking movements she pulls from her wife's body. She loves the way Ty Lee always seems to want her closer.

At eight years old, Shinzei is finally starting to reach the age where she gives her parents some alone time again, and while raising her has brought Azula and Ty Lee together, Azula has missed the consistent physical intimacy, the way Ty Lee's bare body feels against hers as they fall asleep. Their lives are not only about each other anymore, but it is nice to have a few moments that are. Discovering the new stretch lines and wrinkles, the way Ty Lee's body is softer in some places than it was before, how her curves are shaped differently than Azula remembers them, has been like a breath of fresh air.

Azula is just about to slide her lips over the swell of Ty Lee's breast to her hip when she hears the absolute worst sound she can possibly imagine hearing in this moment.

"Mother?"

Ty Lee yelps and pushes away from Azula, who grits her teeth as a heel catches the back of her head. Ty Lee pulls her knees up to her chin, her cheeks growing crimson as she looks down at their daughter.

"Shinzei," she squeaks. "I thought you were asleep."

"What are you doing?" Shinzei asks as though she did not hear Ty Lee's question.

"We're hugging," Ty Lee lies without missing a beat, because though Azula has bested kings and generals she apparently cannot handle an eight-year-old.

"Why don't you have any clothes on?"

"Because it's warmer that way," Ty Lee replies, a little less smoothly this time.

"But it's burning up outside," Shinzei points out.
"Listen, Shinzei," Ty Lee stammers, her expression distorted into a pained grimace. "Sometimes, when you're married, you like to hug your husband or wife without any clothes on because you love them and it makes you feel... closer to them. But, okay, why aren't you in bed?"

"Why aren—I woke up." Shinzei rubs her eyes, as if to emphasize the point, though Azula knows that is not her intention, because her daughter rarely uses body language. In one hand, she is holding a battered stuffed koala sheep that Azula has always hated, but Shinzei cannot fall asleep without it. "I had a bad dream." She climbs onto the bed, completely oblivious to what she has interrupted.

Ty Lee squeezes Azula's knee and then climbs off the bed to retrieve their robes. After she has pulled hers over her shoulders and tied the cord around her waist, she leans toward Shinzei. "What did you dream about?"

"I was at the market," Shinzei answers. Her voice is completely devoid of emotion, like she is reading from the war manifestos that Azula used to love at that age, but the tears glistening at the corner of her eyes betray what she is feeling. "They were laughing at me."

Shinzei has had recurring dreams about the marketplace since she was young. After her third meltdown in those streets, she and Azula do not join Ty Lee when she accompanies Zuko. Not going there anymore often feels like a relief to Azula, but when she remembers her daughter's screams and sobs, she feels incredibly guilty from deriving any pleasure from the result of Shinzei's pain.

"Why were they laughing?" Ty Lee asks, although she and Azula both know the answer.

"Why were they laughing?" Shinzei repeats. "There were too many colors and I couldn't concentrate." She begins to rock back and forth, and Azula frowns. Shinzei's recurring nightmares might seem tamer than the ones she had as a child, but they clearly cause just about as much distress.

"It's okay, it's okay," Ty Lee rushes to assure their daughter, reaching toward her and then pulling away. "Do you want to sleep here tonight?"

Shinzei nods. She climbs up onto the bed, still clutching the koala sheep's ear in one of her fists, and curls up between her mothers. Ty Lee shoots Azula an apologetic smile, which is completely unnecessary because Azula knows what it feels like to be dismissed and sent back into her room to lie alone in bed terrified after a paralyzing nightmare.

When they have all made themselves comfortable and the room is still, Shinzei pokes her small hand out from under the covers and latches it on to Ty Lee's fingers. Azula hears an audible gasp, and when she lifts her head off the pillow to look at her wife over Shinzei's body, she is beaming, her eyes welling with tears.

Azula loves everything about her daughter, cannot imagine loving her any more, no matter how much she was like Azula wanted her to be, but it is difficult not to wish she was capable of being a little more affectionate when, on the rare occasions that Shinzei does initiate physical contract, Azula sees how much it means to her wife.

She leans over, careful not to bump Shinzei, and presses a kiss to the corner of Ty Lee's mouth. "Maybe tomorrow," she whispers.

Ty Lee nods but, as she wipes a tear from her cheek with the back of her free hand, Azula gets the impression that Ty Lee does not care anymore. The interruption has been worth it.
It is not until the next morning, when they are getting dressed and Shinzei has left for breakfast, that Azula begins to panic.

"She saw us, Ty Lee, she saw us. What if she never gets over it? What if it completely mess her up? Why didn't we put something in front of the door in case—"

"Azula," Ty Lee interrupts, her voice low and soothing. She takes Azula's wrists and draws circles on them with her thumbs. "She is completely fine. She doesn't even know what she walked into."

"But she's going to figure it out someday," Azula argues. "And when she does, she's never going to forget it."

"Azula, kids walk in on their parents having sex all the time, okay?" Ty Lee assures her. "It's a normal part of childhood. It's not the same as… what happened to you."

Azula juts her lip out into an adorable pout, but when Ty Lee touches her palm to her wife's cheek, she leans into it. "How do you know?"

"Because I walked in on my parents," Ty Lee explains. "More than once. So did all my sisters. You'd think they would have learned. But I'm okay. My sisters are okay."

"You're okay?" Azula snorts. "You fell for a mental patient."

"I fell for you long before that," Ty Lee answers. "Now, are you okay? Do you want to go down to breakfast? Shinzei will be there. You can see exactly how not scarred for life she is."

"No, wait, Ty Lee—" Azula breaks off as her wife tugs her toward the door of their bedroom. She bites her lip, and Ty Lee stops and tilts her head to the side. "What are we going to tell her when she… when she realizes we weren't hugging?"

"What? That's what my parents told me?" Ty Lee folds her arms in mock offense, but her smile fades when she realizes that Azula is not joking. She takes a step forward to close the gap between them and grasps Azula's forearms. "We'll tell her it's something you do as an adult with the person you love when you want to feel closer to them. It won't be a big deal. I'm telling you, this isn't going to damage her. It'll just be another weird childhood memory she barely ever thinks about."

Azula clenches her teeth, but then she nods. "Okay," she whispers, her voice harsh with uncertainty.

Ty Lee smiles cautiously. "You're an amazing mother, Azula. You know that right?"

"Why?" Azula asks in confused disbelief.

"Because of how much you care about her," Ty Lee answers. She wraps her arms around Azula's neck and holds her, their bodies touching. After a moment, she feels a hesitant hand come to rest on the small of her back. "And you're an amazing wife because of how much you care about me."

"Of course I care about you," Azula mutters. "You took care of me for years. You saw me at my worst and you're still here. And I love you." She does not say those words very often, but she has been trying to say them more, especially because Shinzei is the way that she is, because her expressions of love and appreciation are so muted. Ty Lee knows that they love her, but Azula wants her to hear it from someone.

Ty Lee cups Azula's face between her palms and kisses her so softly Azula barely feels it. "I love you too. Let's get breakfast, okay? You'll see. Everything will be fine."
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