

Blue Dragon

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The upper aristocracy of the Fire Nation isn't something you live with, it's something you survive. It soon becomes necessary to learn what you can with out letting any one know what you know, and occasionally, tiptoe around those who wish to rule.

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0 - Prologue

Prologue

The upper aristocracy of the fire nation isn't something you live with, it's something you survive. I learned this lesson at a surprisingly early age. My father was the first adviser to the Fire Lord. One might say he was the voice of reason on a council of idiots. Most of the time they argued over how many troops were needed to hold an area that didn't need to be held at all, or whether the court ball should have a floral place setting or a traditional one, or my favorite, what to have to drink that day, coffee or tea.

My father quite frequently stayed out of these arguments altogether, and though his opinion wasn't always what the others wished to hear, it was always, always, soundly founded. This perhaps is why he was the first adviser and not decapitated. The Fire Lord was not known for his good temper. My father was always firm with my brothers and me, but there was also a sparkle in his eye. He encouraged our growth and love of learning. My family never wanted for anything, though I'm not sure if this was due to his hard work, or the fact that people would often offer 'gifts' to gain a quicker audience with the Fire Lord. He would entertain us with stories of the current court intrigues. And would present us with problems and ask what our solutions would be. In this way he would challenge our minds and teach us to think in unusual ways. I would often lie awake at night, waiting for him to come home. I would then crawl out of bed and go in search of him. If I was lucky, and he hadn't already gone to bed himself, I would find him in the family library sitting in his favorite chair. My father would take me in his arms, set me in his lap, and read to me from one of the many histories of the Fire Nation he kept in his collection.

My mother was, in the interest of simplicity, a house wife. Though to the rest of us she was so much more. Mother, teacher, scholar, beautician, medic, story teller, and on occasion cook. She raised my two older brothers with a firm hand. Weathered their various escapades and saw them through school with the highest education it was possible to pay for. Not to mention she raised me, one little turtle duck, when all the rest had flown away. She taught me to know gems from glass, to be able to tell the quality of a gown by the tailor's stitch, to dance, and sing (though I never thought my voice was worth much) and to pour tea with grace. And then she would chase the cooks from the kitchen and the two of us would attempt to bake with our own hands. She would also allow me to stay when the society ladies came for lunch. How was I to learn without practice? They all petted me and called me a dear little thing, which I put up with because I would then be allowed to stay and listen to the newest gossip about who had slighted whom, and whose son was expected to marry whose daughter. There was never very much of importance in the gossip, but most of it was exaggerated and I enjoyed trying to piece together the truth.

There were twenty years between myself and the youngest of my brothers. My mother had been led to believe she would never have another child after the complications with her second pregnancy, and so when I arrived the entire house was over come with joy. My brothers were both old enough to be my own father and for the most part I was treated as their own, though neither ever disciplined me. I was gently corrected when something was amiss, and for the rest spoiled. Each of my brothers taught me something they thought valuable. One encourage my love of puzzles, and the other taught me how to fight. In fact it was under my brother's eye that I learned to fire bend. Neither of my parents had that

talent. One of my brothers married had two children of his own, and became 'one of the most promising young men' to enter into Fire Nation politics. The other joined the army and gained the rank of first lieutenant.

I am Lien, daughter of Natsu and Reina, sister of Jung and Tao. There is much I could tell you about myself, and even more you could learn from my family, but none of that is truly very important. That information was given simply so you might understand where I came from.

What you need to know is the truth of the Fire Nation. Why its citizens love her, why its soldiers fight for her, why its nobility dominate her, and why people in general despise her.

I intend to tell you of the royal family.

1 - First Meetings

I

The first time I ever encountered the royal family I was six, and the meeting was entirely a mistake. The plan for that day had been for me to spend the day with my Father, just the two of us, while Mother was treated to a spa day with some of her friends. That all changed when father was summoned to Lord Ozai's manor on a matter of some urgency. Though he was only the younger son of the Fire Lord, he was the son of the Fire Lord none the less, and Ozai had the unfortunate habit of valuing my father's advice. Father was forced to cancel his day with me. Upon further enquiry it was discovered that Ozai had two young children of his own, approximately my age, and that I might spend the day with them in hopes that some time with father might be salvaged. I was taken to their country manor and kept firmly by father's side at all times.

The building was vast and designed with the utmost taste and elegance, the grounds seemed endless to my young eyes, full of trees and greenery. I longed to run off and explore pretending to have some adventure. Father must have sensed it, because his hand rested lightly on my shoulder. Not restraining, but just heavy enough to let me know he was there. The steward of the house showed us into a lavish sitting room. Every thing was either carved or gilded, and the cushions on the chairs were red velvet. But the wood paneling on the walls was dark and the entire affect was almost entirely oppressive. Father didn't seem to mind, but I clung to him. I no longer had any wish to run off and explore.

We sat and waited not more than a few moments before the far door opened and a figure entered the room. The man was tall, like my own father, and he was surprisingly handsome. He was youthful as well. The gray that winged its way through my father's hair barely touched this man's temples, and his eyes were yet unlined. He seemed exactly the sort of man I had always imagined to be the handsome prince from the fairy tails my mother read me before bed. But there was something slightly odd. The man never smiled, and there was a coldness to his eyes that made me shrink back behind my father.

Father had stood and bowed hands folded at the waist, when this man had entered the room but he received only a nod in return. The man sat in a chair opposite where we stood and motioned for father to sit as well. I remained standing. No longer hidden by father's height I now became the object of some scrutiny. And my six year old mind could not quite comprehend why I should be so important that this man desired to meet me rather than just motioning for some servant or other to take me some where out of the way.

"Prince Ozai," my father began a respectful tone. Only to my ears did it seem somewhat exasperated, "I present to you my youngest child, my daughter Lien."

I was motioned to step forward, and with a fearful glance at father I obeyed. "You are a good girl?" he asked me.

"I try to be." I was afraid to lie and make myself seem better; this man's eyes seemed to see right into my soul.

"And you do as you're told."

"Sometimes, sir."

"I am told you have the talent for fire bending?"

"Yes sir, Tao's teaching me."

"A brilliant soldier." Ozai muttered and my father looked pleased. "Tell me Lien, do you study your lessons?"

"Yes sir, when there's some one to help me. I can't practice alone. It's not allowed." I looked back at father to see if adding the last part in had been alright and he nodded.

"Natsu is she making any progress?" I suddenly seemed no longer to exist as far as the man was concerned. It made me mad. I hated it when people talked over my head. But father only nodded politely.

"Yes Prince, at the rate she learns she will be able to attend the academy on time, if not ahead. At this moment she knows the proper stances and breathing techniques and Tao has informed me that she can now control a small flame. She struggles with some things but once she learns a thing she has it perfectly."

"That is good. Both my children have the talent. My son runs around playing with knives all day. He will not apply himself, but Azula, Azula is my protégée. Learns things in an instant bending is like breathing to her!"

It would seem odd to most people I think to hear of mere children learning to bend fire at the age of six or so, but it must be remembered that our nation was at war. Every fire bender was trained to be an elite weapon against those who would destroy us, and the younger you learned the more time there was to perfect the art. Perhaps as a female it was not so important for me to learn, but my brother was a soldier, and he insisted.

My share in the audience was now over. Ozai called back the steward and requested the locations of his children. Upon learning that both were in the gardens with their cozen it was ordered that I should accompany the steward out.

I followed the elderly man through several winding halls and down a stairway to a set of glass doors leading to a terrace. I was now so thoroughly lost that there was no possibility of finding my way back to my father. Perhaps this had been done purposely; I never learned one way or the other. Out on the terrace there were several people sitting round a fountain. I was immediately taken out and introduced to them with out ceremony. At this point in time we were still equals, no matter who their father was.

Azula was my age and her brother Zuko a year older. After that morning I had some fear that they might be like the man they called their father, and in Azula I was not disappointed.

2 - Introductions

II

Nobody looked at me when I stepped out side. This was understandable for the two boy's who were playing some sort of racing game up and down the terrace, and one of the girl's had her back to me so she couldn't have known I was there. The other however, deliberately looked away. The two girls were sitting on a fountain in the middle of the terrace and pointedly ignoring the boys who ran past them two or there times in succession. I could also see an elderly lady sitting in a near by corner knitting something and watching the kids. She smiled at me but said nothing.

The boys saw me first. Both smiled and waved though they continued the run. The winner of their game apparently had to be the first to do so many laps around the fountain. It was obvious that the older was allowing his cozen to win. The younger of the two nearly tripped as he waved and the girl whose back had previously been turned away looked up and around. She didn't actually smile at me but her look quite plainly said 'finally some one else to talk too.' I couldn't help but smile at her. She took my smile as an invitation and immediately stood and walked over to me. The girl had dark hair and eyes, and her hair was in an elaborate form of pigtails. He companion who's hair was up formally, rolled her golden eyes before following.

"I'm Mai." She said walking up to me.

"My name's Lien." I answered still smiling.

"Are you one of Azula's friends too?" Mai asked me. She had started out in a bored tone of voice but as she asked this question she actually seemed some what interested in the answer. Before I could open my mouth the other girl jumped in.

"No, she's not. She's the daughter of the adviser my daddy's talking to. She's only here because my daddy said she could come." Azula talked right over my head like her father had earlier. Mai did not.

"Well since you are here Lien perhaps you can help make things a bit more interesting. Azula wanted to teach me a game, but the boys won't play and it's no fun with just two people."

"Sure I . . ."

"Who said she was invited, Mai?" Azula stomped up right in front of me and stuck her face in mine. She was slightly taller then I was and so she had to stoop a little to look in my eyes. I didn't move. "Who said I wanted you here?"

I opened my mouth stunned. I had never thought that I might be unwelcome. Father had brought me with permission, and Mai seemed to want me around. Maybe Azula was like the bullies Tao had told me about. Tao had said if you stand up to them then they won't think they can make you do anything. At least, I thought that's what Tao had said. Taking deep breath I answered her.

"I was invited. Your father said . . ." I never got any further.

"Azula, stop it." Mai snapped, "She doesn't know you think that's funny." before Azula could answer the two boys came over to find out what was going on.

I have already said that Zuko was a year older than my self. His cozen was eight years older than me and quite a bit taller, and I'm afraid to say I turned shy. He was kind though and didn't poke fun at my suddenly red face. Rather Lu Ten immediately addressed Azula demanding to know what was going on and why I looked frightened.

"I was just making a small joke." Azula smiled innocently, "I didn't realize she would take me seriously."

"Azula, your jokes are never funny." Her brother muttered.

"Says who, Zuzu?"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT." Zuko shouted immediately taking offence to the pet name. I wondered briefly who had come up with it.

Lu Ten put a stop to that argument before it could turn into a full blown brawl. "Why don't we play a game? Something we can all agree on." A pointed look was shot at Azula. And so it was that for the next thirty minutes every one sat on the steps that led from the terrace to the yard. Lu Ten sat in the middle with me on one side and Zuko on the other. Azula and Mai perched on the step below us. Lu Ten went to some trouble making sure Zuko and Azula were on opposite side from each other. Nearly every suggestion we could come up with was shot down by some one.

"Pi sho?" Lu Ten asked

"That is so boring." Mai answered, "How about hide and seek or sardines?"

"Father wouldn't like that. "Zuko answered.

"How about if we didn't go in the house?"

"That might work."

"But I don't want to play baby games." Mai looked a bit hurt and Azula muttered an apology when she received the look from her cozen.

"Ball?" Zuko suggested

"Some one would have to sit out, dum dum."

"HEY!"

"Guys!" the warning in Lu Ten's voice was not to be ignored. Things went on like this for some time with each person offering a suggestion and some one else shooting down. They didn't want to play that game, too many people were needed, not enough people could play, and the list went on.

"What about cards?" I ventured eventually. Everybody looked at me and then smiled. No one could think of an objection. Lu Ten went back to the house and returned with a deck of hand painted cards. Not the question was what game to play. Mai wanted something fun, while Azula wanted something she could win, she flat out refused to play slaps, and Lu Ten wanted to teach everybody a new game he learned at school. Neither Zuko nor myself had an opinion, but Zuko voted opposite his sister every time her opinion was voiced. There was some argument until it was suggested that we all take turns. I did wonder why Azula and her brother fought so much. My brother's never fought with me.

We all spread out in a circle on the terrace to play and everyone seemed to be enjoying them selves. Zuko and Azula broke out into several squabbles each accusing the other of cheating. Lu Ten stepped in each time to put a stop to it but at one point he looked over at the old woman who was still sitting in her corner. She only smiled her encouragement and nodded at him before going back to her knitting.

It was this way our fathers found us. Both men smiled at the scene, and father collected me to leave. Pleasantries were exchanged and I clambered into the carriage thinking I'd been lucky to make so many new friends. Father climbed in across from me and the carriage started the two hour journey back to town. He informed me that we were going out to dinner and that we would then pick up my mother and see a play. I clapped my hands with joy. I never got to see any plays except when there were performers in the street and even then I was never allowed to watch the entire thing. Father however refused to tell me what the play would be about and so I changed the subject instead asking him a question that had been burning in my mind all day.

"Father, how come Azula and Zuko fight so much?"

Father threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Honey, Zuko and Azula are so close in age I'd be

surprised if they didn't fight. You and your brother's are so far apart that I'm afraid you've been spoiled. Perhaps you should spend time with children your own age more often."

3 - house guest

III

The play was nothing short of wonderful. And to my surprise Zuko and Azula were also there. We were instantly invited to join the family in their private box, my mother having been a onetime society friend of the Lady Ursa and the two women wishing to catch up. There was very little talking during the performance but afterwards it was learned that the Prince and his wife were planning on a trip for their anniversary. My parents immediately volunteered to take in Zuko and Azula for the four days there parents would be gone. Though I am now no longer sure how much of an act of kindness it was. It seems to me now that Lord Ozai left little room for argument.

The play itself was *The Tail of Ryo* one of the Fire nation's most beloved Lords. As a youth he had been terribly beaten and then banished by his evil Uncle who wanted the thrown himself. Ryo had traveled the world learning to fight from the various nations, battling various viscous beasts, escaping from bandits, and saving his love Kei from a dangerous Earth bender. Ryo eventually made his way back to the Fire Nation and overthrew his Uncle where he then liberated his people form something very like slavery and held the land in peace for the rest of his sixty year reign. It was a beautiful story and beloved by many of the Fire Nation people. It never occurred to me that the Theater had taken a risk in performing it. With the current war anything that portrayed the other nations in a favorable light was frowned upon. In later years the play would be banned altogether.

Afterward plans were made for the Prince's children to join us in two weeks. My family headed home and Mother immediately began preparations for our house guests.

Our house guests arrived early in the morning soon after our family had finished breakfast. Their mother dropped them off and with a hasty word of thanks and apologies for not being able to stay and talk, they were already late, she returned to the carriage with her husband and drove off. As both my brothers now had homes of their own Zuko and Azula were very quickly settled in their old rooms. My mother had gone to great lengths to make both rooms more comfortable for out guests, though Tao's room was left virtually untouched, Zuko having already voiced his interest in learning to fight and Tao having a remarkable collection of swords displayed on his wall. Tao to my mother's great frustration, refused to move all of his junk into his own home as he was always either on the battle field or at our house. Jung's room had been emptied long since of everything except the furniture and in order to accommodate Azula My mother had moved any sort of decoration she thought Azula might like into the room. The room was perfectly suited to my mother's taste and would probably have made most women quite comfortable, but the result of the redecoration made the entire thing look quite girly, even if it was in a very classic stile. I noted Azula's immediate frown the moment she entered the room, though she said absolutely nothing. She was for some reason unwilling to insult her hosts. One or the other of her parents must have spoken to her about being polite. Azula would have to put up with the decorations for the two weeks she was with us.

She did however find a solution very quickly. Spend as little time in the room as possible. While Zuko was perfectly willing to stand around and marvel at Tao's sword collection Azula very quickly dragged both of us down the hall demanding a tour of the house. My mother had some business to attend to and

we were left to amuse our selves until lunch. Although unwilling to spend the day taking orders from Azula, I was more then willing to show off our house. My mother had excellent taste, and my father could afford a certain amount of luxury, though nether was ever in excess or gaudy. In my opinion my family had the best house in the world.

I naturally started the tour on the ground floor, showing them the small yard that surrounded three of the four sides of the house, the practice yard in back that had originally been built for Father's morning routine, though it had been later been converted to an arena for Tao's enjoyment. From their we went through the kitchen, dining area, and servants quarters, as well as the front parlor and father's library. Upstairs were the bedrooms of course and mother's private lounge. I have already said that I thought the house wonderful, and Zuko seemed to like it well enough, but Azula made no secret of the fact that she was quite thoroughly board. At least she was until she found the stairs that lead to the attic.

"What's up there?"

"Nothing but a bunch of old junk and boxes." I answered. In truth I really had no idea what was up there and I really didnt care, but Azula headed straight for the stairs not giving any one else a chance to suggest something else. Zuko gave me a questioning glance, but I just shrugged and followed Azula.

When we reached the top I was a little surprised to find that Azula had already emptied one of the boxes on the floor. I was a little nervous of her actions. No one ever went up here, and Mother had never said I could either, but Azula was already sorting through a pile of old clothing and laughing at what she found. As long as she didn't ruin anything I figured it would be ok.

"Look at this Zuzu." Azula said holding up a rather small set of armored shoulder pads, "They almost look like they would fit you!"

"I've told you a hundred times not to call me that!" Zuko muttered moving past me to take them from her. He didn't really sound angry, and I was grateful they hadn't started arguing again.

We spent several hours going through the boxes and sorting what we found. It was much easier to keep track of what we d been through if we kept all the similar items together. Cloths in one pile, papers in another. I even found a book Father had been searching for. True everything was still scattered all over the floor, but it was so interesting to see what sorts of things my parents had kept that I no longer cared. The boxes them selves were made of various kinds of wood. Some painted some carved, and some just plain.

The three of us soon acquired an odd assortment of items that made us look like a troop of ragtag, players. Zuko had found a helmet to mach the shoulder pads and well as an empty scabbard that he very quickly buckled around his waist. I though that they might have belonged to Tao at one point. Azula found a crazy hat and placed in immediately on my head, claiming that it looked good on me. Zuko tried not to laugh so I knew she'd been lying, but I kept it on because I'd found a painted miniature of mother wearing the same hat while she held a baby Jung in her lap. Azula had also found a filmy scarf of superb quality that she draped around her neck.

So absorbed were we in the boxes that none of use noticed how late it was until we heard footsteps on the stairs and Tao appeared.

"Here you are! I wondered . . ." he looked around. "What on earth ever possessed you to come up here?"

"Mom won't be mad will she?" I asked a bit uncertain.

"Are you kidding? She's been meaning to go through these boxes for years. You kid's have just saved her quite a bit of trouble. Come on let's put this stuff back and then go down to lunch." As he said this Tao picked up a pile of cloths and placed them in an empty trunk. "Zuko, Azula, if you'd like your father has asked me to help you keep up with your lessons, since I'm teaching Lien anyway. If you like we can start after lunch."

"Well it's nice to know I'll have something to do while I'm here." Azula responded. Zuko didn't look too happy.

4 - training

Lunch was uneventful. Mother asked what we had been doing with ourselves that morning and Azula told her, in a voice that quite plainly stated that she had had every right to entertain herself with our belongings. Mother frowned slightly, but as Tao had predicted, dolled out praise for our saving her the trouble of sorting through those boxes herself.

After lunch we were all escorted out back to Tao's practice ring. He was quite thorough in making sure he knew exactly where Zuko and Azula's training stood. He questioned each of them closely and I had to sit quietly for several minutes before the training could begin. It was determined that Azula was at a level with me while Zuko was several lessons behind. Now I understood why Zuko had been unhappy with the idea of continuing the lessons at my house. He had no wish to have his sister make him look like a fool in front of our hosts. That however was exactly what Azula did.

She was as her father had called her a protégé, and she picked up the technique Tao was trying to teach us in only a few tries. I couldn't even come close. Tao set her to practice with me, but Azula spent more time showing off and shooting pointed looks at her brother than helping me, and so I was forced to figure out the trick of the lesson on my own. Zuko looked a little bit heartened by the fact that I too had to practice, but he was so distracted by his sister's showing off, that he failed again and again to do as Tao asked. Tao was patient though and in his wisdom moved so he blocked Azula from her brother's view and continued to work with him taking Zuko step by step through the process.

We practiced for several hours. I got the trick after about a half hour of trial and error. Zuko took longer. And when he did finally have the lesson he was thoroughly disheartened. Tao saw it and somehow knew the solution. Some one must have told Tao about Zuko's interest in blades because he ordered us to stay where we were and disappeared into the house. After a few moments he reappeared with a set of broad swords.

"There's something else I thought you might like to learn." Zuko's smile stretched across his face. Tao had done the right thing. He immediately began showing Zuko the proper stance and how to hold the swords. Azula made no point in trying not to show her lack of interest.

"What a waist of time!" she mumbled but not so quietly no one heard her.

"Oh I don't know." Tao replied calmly, "These blades have saved my life countless times."

"Really?" Now she was interested. I loved Tao's stories. And even more I loved to watch him practice. It always seemed like a sort of dance to me, beautiful. It would have been even more so if it wasn't so deadly.

Disappearing into the house I found a couple of cushions we could sit on and brought them out to the practice ring. Tao waited only for me to return before he began the story, teaching Zuko about the broad swords as he went.

"I was traveling through Earth kingdom territory with some pals of mine on our way to the new base camp when suddenly we were ambushed. How the Earth benders had found our position I don't know, but it was suddenly our three to their twenty. And all of them were Earth benders." I knew Tao was exaggerating slightly. Last time he'd told this story the number had been fifteen. Tao positioned Zuko's hand on the swords and taught him how to thrust before continuing.

"I very quickly realized that I couldn't bend fast enough. Maybe if I had the talent for bending lightning . . . but I don't. I remembered my broad swords and pulled them out of the scabbard just in time. I dogged left and rolled sweeping on of the bender's feet out from under them . . ." Azula laughed in delight as Tao demonstrated. ". . . and Lei flipped off my back to land on top of two others. I spun right and two more hit each other instead of me. We were now down to five. Two of them took one look at their felled comrades and fled. The other three charged us. I side stepped, and the man charging me went flying in to the ground. We took the prisoners back to base camp and the general congratulated us in person. The prisoners provided valuable information that we were able to use to strengthen our forces." Azula and I clapped but Zuko looked puzzled.

"What happened afterwards." He asked Tao handing back the broad swords. "What happened to the prisoners after they gave you the information?"

Tao shrugged." I honestly don't know. . . . I suppose they were put in jail." Zuko looked slightly troubled.

5 - Vsiting

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That was the nature of my relationship with the royal Family for some time. My father would, as a favor to the Prince, offer to watch Zuko and Azula when needed. Very rarely, if ever was I invited back to the Manor before Azula and I attended school together. When I was, it was at Zuko's invitation, not Azula's. I truly don't think Azula ever cared much for me. I was an antidote for her boredom. Never really a friend, and certainly not a confidant like Mai.

The first of the sparse occasions I visited the manor before school, was, like my first visit, and accident. Just after my seventh birthday Mother and I were at the market and we were just about to leave the tailors when Lady Ursa arrived escorting a very sullen looking Zuko through the door. "Really Zuko we need to get you some new pants. The knees are out of nearly every pair you own."

"But Mom . . ." Zuko never got to finish his complaint. Lady Ursa spotted my mother in an instant and the two immediately fell to talking, never mind that we were on our way out and Zuko needed new pants.

". . . and he's taking you to the Astron Opera? How wonderful." Lady Ursa said to my mother speaking of my Father's latest escapade.

"Yes Lori was supposed to watch Lein that day, but with her own girl sick . . . I'm just not sure . . ."

"Well surly you know some one else. There's no reason to give up the trip for one little mishap . . ." The opera was almost half a day's ride away and the show itself would last several hours. There was no way I would be able to sit still that long and one of Mother's friends had offered to watch me while my parents enjoyed them selves. But with the recent illness going around my mother was actually considering staying home.

Zuko had been listening to the conversation and understanding what was going on and immediately began tugging on the corner of his mother's robe. "The Opera's tomorrow and you've been looking forward to it . . . yes dear."

"Lein could stay with us."

"What?" Lady Ursa knelt down to better hear her son, and Zuko looked earnestly into her face.

"Lein could stay with us while her parents go to the . . . the . . . where ever it is. We have lots of room, and when you go some where me and Azula have stayed with them . . ." he trailed off looking suddenly unsure, but his mother only hugs him. "That's a wonderful Idea." Zuko shot me a huge grin and I smiled back.

"Are you sure it won't be an intrusion?"

“Absolutely.”

Mother and father dropped me off on their way to the opera. Zuko and his mother were waiting patiently for me in the courts yard by a small pond that was home to a family of turtle ducks. Azula too was waiting, though she was anything but patient. After my parents left Lady Ursa looked at us.

“So do you children have any idea what you want to do?”

Azula opened her mouth but her brother spoke first, “I do.” He said grabbing my hand and pulling me to the stairs. “Come on I want to show you my collection.” Ursa smile as he lead me, and walked away. Azula followed reluctantly. Zuko lead me down to corridors to what was obviously his room. Dragging me inside he pulled me to face one of the walls and I saw immediately what he was talking about when he had said collection. Much like Tao’s room at home, this wall supported a large display of blades. Swords, knives daggers, some ornamental, some plain. This was Zuko’s pride and joy.

“Uncle Iroh sent me that one from the ruins in Arich. Don’t know how he found it, but he gave it to me!” The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

“Such a waist of time.” Azula muttered from behind us, but for once Zuko ignored her, “those are my favorite.” He said pointing to a set of broad swords. “I’m not very good with them yet. Your brothers been teaching me off and on though . . .” he pulled down a small dagger and unsheathed it. “Stand back I want to show you something.” Tossing the sheath on the bed he began to lunge and parry.

Azula disappeared at some point during the demonstration but I didn’t care. Then Zuko decides that I should learn to use the dagger. He beckoned me forward and placed the blade in my right hand.

“Hold it like this see? And the lunge forward.”

“Lunge?”

“Take a large step and bend your body as you go with the blade out in front . . . like this.” He took the Dagger back and demonstrated before passing it to me again. I fumbled the move several times but eventually got it.

“I did it!” I said excitedly turning to Zuko who grinned at me. “I really did it!”

“You sure did.” A deep hearty voice said from the doorway to the room, and then came a rolling laugh.