

Less Than a Day in Paradise

An Avatar Story

for Beccastareyes

by Rodo

THE EFFICIENT BUREAUCRACY of the Fire Nation hadn't lost any time putting Azula in secure shackles once Zuko was properly bandaged and they knew for certain who was going to be the next Fire Lord, the snivelling opportunists. The last thing she heard of the outside or above or beyond before they locked her away in the darkness was that her father had lost against the Avatar. She felt perversely glad even though tears ran down her face and terror tore her chest apart. Nothing made sense anymore, not the world and not her feelings, and during all that, the pitying look on her mother's face and her father's disgust haunted her. So she cried and raged to fill the emptiness.



“Hi, Azula,” Zuko says. He is standing there, red robes gleaming, the topknot piece of the Fire Lord on his head. He doesn't wear it proudly and seems ill at ease, visiting her, looking down on what she has become.

“Zuzu,” she drawls. It sounds slurred in her ears, though. Zuko frowns. “What brings you to me? Want to gloat?”

He sighs, and Azula wants to rip his throat out.

“No, Azula. You're ill. I wanted to see how you are.”

“Just fine, thank you for asking. Now shoo. Go play everyone's favourite Firebender again. You're so good at it.”

He looks at her still, as if there was something on her face. But there isn't and he finally looks away. "That was always you, don't you remember?"

Azula laughs. He has a sense of humour all of a sudden. How quaint. "No. Mother, Uncle, Lu Ten, even Ty Lee and Mai always liked you best. They spent time with me when they had to, but you were the one who they smiled at when they felt like it, the one who got the heartfelt presents and the hugs. I was always better, *I deserved them, not you!*" she snarls.

Zuko slowly fades away, disappearing into the darkness that he came from. "Being a talented bender isn't everything, Azula."



Azula sat in the darkness and cried, but even she could only cry so much. She didn't even understand why she did it. When her muscles stopped cramping up, she didn't have the time to unravel herself before sleep came and carried her into the realm of half-truths and hallucinations which confused her more and more, until reality and sleep fully became one, familiar and alien at the same time. She was herself again, yet she didn't exist anymore, apart from the pain, hunger and loneliness that gnawed at her soul every once in a while. In those moments, she felt almost real.



"Such a disappointment," her father says.

Azula wakes up from her not too pleasant dream and stares at him. He is wearing red, but not the pompous robes he prefers. She blinks, reality seeming too unreal. She's still half dreaming, she thinks, and the drowsiness is far too stubborn. "Did they free you?" she asks half hopeful, half fearing the answer. She's not sure what she wishes for. "Are you Fire Lord again?"

Something twitches over his face, a snarl maybe, or a sneer. "Of course not. Didn't you listen to the guards? The Avatar took my bending away. I will never be Fire Lord again."

Azula feels ... happy, she thinks is the word. She doesn't quite know why, since her father has been nothing but good to her, the only one who has ever appreciated her, loved her, cherished her.

"Don't be absurd," her father snorts. "If my father had asked for your death and not Zuko's, I would have obliged him. You were useful. Your talent was a great asset to my power, and your devotion to me ensured that you would never act against me. That was all."

Azula cries and screams until her voice dies in her throat then. Insults him, although it is herself she's cursing at, and her naïveté. She cries for herself and all the things she has never had, and for those that she has never realised she wanted. And then she sees him, standing before her, in his plain clothes. His haughty expression is nothing but a mask. He has nothing to back it up anymore; he is nothing, and she is everything.

"Being a talented bender isn't everything, Azula," her father echoes.

She spits at him.



Azula felt weak, so weak. No strength was left to fuel her fire, no anger to sustain her rages, and her mother, as there as never before, carefully petted her hair. Her father sneered disapprovingly and said something nasty. Azula didn't listen. She felt too empty, so cold inside that her bones were shivering. Her torn and charred clothes provided a grotesque imitation of comfort.

The ghost of a guard flitted past and brought her food. A bowl of soup and one of rice, accompanied by a cup of tea. She gulped them down greedily, out of pure instinct, as she had for weeks or months, maybe even years, she couldn't tell anymore. This, however, was the first time she felt conscious enough to taste the salty algae, feel the sticky rice and the warm and bitter tea. It had to be real, even though it tasted fake. Her stomach calmed considerably anyhow.

"There, you feel better now, don't you?" her mother cooed.

"Don't act as if you care, mother. You were right about me, you should be happy," Azula croaked. She could have sworn it had only been minutes since she last spoke.

“Azula ...”

“Shut up and leave me alone!” she hissed, and her mother miraculously obeyed. She kept lurking in her eye, though, while blessed silence crept into the cell.



She stands there again. Stands and watches. She always did that when Azula was a child. Azula hated it then too. The warm concerned glances were reserved for Zuko, as were the adoring ones. She had always watched Azula as if she was something dangerous, as if there was something wrong with her.

“There is something wrong with you,” her mother says calmly. “But it’s not what you think. I’ve always loved you, Azula, and so do your brother and uncle. We will always love you, you just never accepted that our love isn’t all-encompassing. It is unconditional, but we love other people too, and we don’t always agree with you.”

“You have a nice way of showing it,” Azula answers, gesturing at the darkness around them.

Sadness spreads across her mother’s face. “You are sick, Azula, please listen to me. You are hallucinating and you are not yourself anymore. The little girl I knew was mean and selfish, true, but she wasn’t as full of hate as you are now. She had goals besides revenge, feelings that were not hate and dreams that she can still achieve. Please, Azula, I love you! Come back to me.”



When she woke up next, Azula still felt cold and exhausted. She could barely lift her hand and gave up trying after a few frustrating attempts. Tears piled up inside her, but she refused to give in. She would not break, not again, that spark of pride that sounded like her grandfather murmured. It gave her hope, and much more importantly: focus. She would not cry, not even blink when the levee broke and tears rolled down her face and into her ears. She did not move a muscle and stared into the darkness above her, wondering how high the ceiling was. There had to be one. But there was no light that could guide her misted

eyes. Once, she tried to breathe fire and felt her body freeze at the mere effort.

Underneath her lay stone, Azula determined –

Shut up Father, I am doing my best, what else do you think I should do?

– and what had once been blankets and now were tattered rags. She tasted the aftermath of ashes when she was close to them, the bitter, dry aroma of fruitless revenge.

“Never bend without a good reason,” her Firebending teacher admonished her.

“Bending for its own sake is a good enough reason,” she retorted.

And then there was the cold. It took her an eternity to realise that it wasn’t just her or something they did to her when they locked her into this place. When she did, a hollow laugh echoed through the cell.

“Yes,” young Zuko said, playing with his favourite Turtle Duck. “You’re a Firebender. The weaknesses of every Firebender are cold and darkness, because they are the absence of fire and its natural enemy. That is why the Fire Nation is at the equator, where it is always warm and sunny. Didn’t you pay attention in school?”

“Thank you, Zuzu. You just can’t stop kicking me when I’m down, can you? Even though you’ve won? Some noble warrior you are.”

Zuko looked at her. He wasn’t impressed. “Neither could you, don’t forget that,” he stated. Azula smiled when she saw the ugly scar on his too young face. He had deserved it.



Silence surrounded her. No other prisoners moaned or screamed; only her ghosts came to visit her. The Avatar lectured her, but she could not see him. He liked hiding in the dark. Sometimes she dreamed of the glowing blue tattoos and woke up with dread in her empty stomach. Ty Lee sat in a corner and never said a word, until Azula threw her bowl or tattered cushion right between her disappointed eyes.

Meanwhile, Azula wondered what happened on the outside, to the real Avatar and the real Ty Lee. With Zuko being the Fire Lord, the war must be over. Her brother would let the Earth Kingdom walk all over him, even though the war had been almost won too.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Zuko sighed. He looked tired and worn.

Azula snorted. Then someone brought her soup. She felt the warmth – the tiny bit of fire still left in the water – disappear into the air as the steam travelled upwards. Only somehow, something was different today. She felt the warmth stretch and spread farther and farther, until a realisation dawned on her: fire never died. It just stretched until it became cold. She was not cut off from her element after all; it was all around her, just harder to reach! She couldn't help but smirk at the baffled look on Uncle's face. Yes, she was the best Firebender in the world, and she would prove it.



It had almost worked, but the warmth withdrew into the cold air again.

“No surprise there,” Mai chimed in.

“Oh, be quiet, I'm trying to concentrate.”

Azula drew in a deep breath and controlled the flow of fire. She tried to draw it in, along with the air, so that it could burn inside her. It was so different than the Firebending she had learned, which relied on pushing the inner fire outside, but it worked. The scant warmth in the cell slowly closed in on her, flowed into her body and warmed her limbs for the first time in months.

When Azula opened her eyes, she held a tiny flame between her fingers, almost as big as a firefly. The walls around her sparkled in the weak light. They were coated with a thin sheen of frost. Azula cheered and cackled even after the flame was gone, until one of the guards shuffled by and eyed her suspiciously.

“I did it!” she told – she was sure that somebody had been there, but couldn't remember who.



The Waterbender had inspired Azula more than she would ever admit. She had found out early on that she would never manage a flame big enough to blow out the door. And so she looked at the frost on the wall. It reminded her of Katara still, even though she was used to its presence by now. The thought of shackles frozen until they broke came to her mind. *That* was something she could do.

So Azula stumbled to the door and sucked as much warmth out of the lock and the hinges as she could. Then she tried to break them, but it didn't work. Muffled banging noises rang through the cell, and although she was sure that nobody else was imprisoned down here, the guards could come by at any moment.

"Patience," her mother whispered. "You have all the time you need."

Azula bit down an answer; she had more important things to focus on. She was sweating and shivering by the time the lock finally gave way. The guard hadn't even noticed her work when he had brought her food some time before, but Azula still refrained from celebrating her victory. She was out of her cell, true, but not yet free.

The guards patrolled the icy corridors with dim glowing crystals and she hid behind stones and in corners whenever she caught a glimpse of light. The prison was hewn, not built, so she worked her way upwards through a labyrinth of tunnels that led nowhere or to yet another row of cells, only a few of them occupied.

"Look," a voice said.

Azula winced. It took her a few seconds to realise that not only was there no guard, the tunnel in front of her led into a courtyard, with buildings that were illuminated by moon light. Crickets chirped and a warm breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees. It looked peaceful, nothing like a prison.

"It's a hospital," her mother said abruptly.

Azula turned to face her. Then she looked into the rooms she could see. White walls and beds with restraints. A shiver ran down her spine. Her instincts screamed at her and told her to flee, but she walked closer instead. She wanted to see what Zuko had done to her.

"It wasn't him," her mother argued. "He would never have done that to anyone. It was them, the people working here. Zuko will punish them once he finds out."

"But he won't find out from me." A bird chirped in the trees, telling her of freedom and days in the sun. Zuko could wait, as could the Fire Nation. She was free. Her feet buried themselves in fallen leaves and her heart jumped in her chest as she ran farther and faster than ever before in her life. Free to walk, free to bend and free to see the sun again. Red light dawned on the horizon and Azula laughed.