pills of sand

by ohmygodwhy

Summary

He immediately tunes out the rest of what the guy says, turning back to the match. He can’t see very clearly, but she doesn’t have shoes on, her head doesn’t turn to follow her opponent, and she’s moving in a way completely unlike any of the other shit he’s seen so far.

He leans forwards, intrigued.

No way, he thinks. No way?

(or: zuko meets toph)

Notes

so this is like..........an au of my au bc I was thinking about what would happen if he didn’t get too paranoid and leave before he cld see/meet toph. the timeline is prob off here but since i dont care im just going with: it happens before aang + the crew get to town, and obv before zuko alone.

also its time to acknowledge the fact tht zuko lived and grew up on a ship full of sailors for 3 years and definitely had his vocabulary shaped by them. basically im saying tht there’s No way zuko doesnt say fuck on the daily. nick just couldn't give he and toph the range they deserved

See the end of the work for more notes.
He’s in Town Number Two, with the tournaments that are Earthbending Only, when he catches someone watching him. He doesn’t really want to cause a scene in this illegal underground bending tournament, but he also doesn’t wanna have to leave. So he compromises, and moves to the other side of the ring, slipping between people and pulling his hood over his head to shake whoever the hell was looking at him off.

He finds a seat at the end of a row closer to the front than he was before, and he crosses his legs to take up as little space as possible. Lucky for him, the next match is starting.

It’s some big muscly dude, with no shirt and kind of fucked up teeth, stomping around the ring and beating his chest. Agni, they’re really playing this shit up. He resolves himself to a more boring match of rock throwing, wishing the dude who burrowed underground would come back, when they introduce their “reigning champion”.

Instead of another shirtless guy with muscle-on-muscle, it’s a young, small, dark haired girl. He’s caught so off guard that he misses half of her introduction. He hears the tail end of the word bandit, and turns to the guy next to him.

“What’s her name?” he asks.

The guy looks thrown by his scar for a moment, in that annoying ass way so many people in the middle of towns are, and says, “Uh, the Blind Bandit? I’ve only been to two of these, but I think she’s been the champion for a while.”

He immediately tunes out the rest of what the guy says, turning back to the match. He can’t see very clearly, but she doesn’t have shoes on, her head doesn’t turn to follow her opponent, and she’s moving in a way completely unlike any of the other shit he’s seen so far.

He leans forwards, intrigued.

No way, he thinks. No way?

He watches the way she moves - practically still until she finds her opening, lets her opponent stomp around and make all the noise he wants, before she goes in. She moves, and the earth moves with her. It’s not as much cause and effect as it is unison. She doesn’t need to see to know when there are rocks flying at her, or when the hippo guy is gonna move the ground - does she feel it? he wonders. Does she hear it? She must be so fucking in tuned with her element in a way Zuko truly admires. Can it be that way with fire?

He wonders if she’s ever fought anyone who isn’t an earth bender—can she tell where fire is gonna come the same way she can tell where the earth will? No, that’s stupid. But is it? He doesn’t know - he doesn’t know how it works in the first place.

He was hoping to find one of the benders after the tournament was over, and see if he could get one of them to spar with him. All the ones that have come before right now seem like they’d be straight up garbage compared to her.

The match is over before her opponent really has a chance to catch his breath, and Zuko can’t look away from it. The crowd is silent in a moment of collective shock, and then it erupts. She basks in it, raising her little fists in the air.
He watches her lay out three more earthbenders, all bigger and older than she is, laughing like it’s nothing.

She’s crowned The Reigning Champion again at the end, obviously.

He doesn’t know how he manages to catch her, honestly. The whole underground stadium is a buzz with people and manic energy, and he leaps down into the pit where he’s probably not supposed to be, and catches the green-white-black blur of her back.

“Oh, hey,” he calls, stutters because he doesn’t know her name and doesn’t want to call her ‘The Blind Bandit’, “Um, champion girl?”

It’s loud, but she still hears him. She spins around, this incredulous look on her surprisingly young face. “Champion girl?” she repeats, in her surprisingly young voice, sounding like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or be offended. Zuko kind of feels the same way - first the fucking Avatar is twelve, and now this? Spirits.

“Sorry,” he says, shrugging off his surprise, “Am I supposed to call you The Blind Bandit?”

“That’s my stage name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he says, “I guess it is.”

It’s a little disconcerting up close, the gray film over her eyes, the way she stares off into the air next to him instead of at him. It’s somehow relaxing, not being seen.

“So who the hell are you? A fan, or something?”

“Oh, not really - “ She frowns, and he backtracks, “I’ve never been to - this before. And I saw you fighting. Are you really blind?”

He’s never been very fucking tactful. Even he realizes this.

Surprisingly, she doesn’t immediately tell him to fuck off. “Yeah,” she says, “I am. And I still laid all those guys flat, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” he agrees, “You did. How’d you do it?”

“Um, I earthbent? That was kinda the point of the whole thing.”

Zuko ignores the snark in her voice. He thinks Uncle would like her. “Yeah, but you did it differently.”

“What?” her head tilts up like she’s trying to appear to look him in the face, but it’s a little bit off. He takes a small step to the right.

“The way you bent was different. You were better.”

“Well, obviously I was better,” she says, but seems to be more interested in the conversation that she was a minute ago. “So what? You want something?”

He opens his mouth, not sure where to start. “I - ”

There’s a rush of sound; the ceiling above them opening up. “It’s over,” the little earthbender says,
and gestures for him to follow her, “Come on, or we might get caught.”

He follows her. She opens the wall up for them to walk through, and closes it behind them. Zuko is painfully aware that she could crush easily him to death right now. He wonders if she can feel him walking behind her, an if maybe that’s why she seems so unbothered having a stranger at her back.

When she opens the earth back up again, they’re in a little grassy area right outside the walls of the town. He recognizes it from when he first got here. His camp isn’t too far from here, actually.

“So, random stranger,” she says, leaning against the wall, “What do you want?”

He thinks for a moment, and decides that he’s not gonna make sense no matter what he says. “This might sound kinda weird in hindsight, but I… I guess I want you to show me how - how you did that, back there.”

“You want me to teach you how to bend?” she asks incredulously.

“I’m not an earthbender,” he admits.

She blinks in his general direction, eyebrows twisting up. It’s such a childlike expression of confusion that it strikes him for a moment.

“What? Then what the hell do you want me to do?”

“I just—shit, I don’t know,” He’s not a prince anymore; he can’t just ask people to teach him something and expect to be taught. He doesn’t even know what exactly he needs to be taught. “I need to learn how to fight. I need to practice.”

“You don’t know how to fight?”

“I need to learn how to fight everyone,” he amends, “Anyone. Every type of person. I need to learn how to win.”

“I definitely know how to do that,” she says, young and cocky with the skill to back it up, “But I still don’t see how I can teach you shit.”

“I just want you to fight me.”

“What, like a match?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t volunteer for this tournament, ‘cause it’s earth only.”

“There’re some that aren’t?” She looks genuinely surprised but this. It surprises Zuko for a moment, because he would’ve thought someone as deep into it as her would know about tournaments outside of town.

“Uh, yeah. There’s one a few towns over that I was in for a while.”

“You fought earthbenders, in an earthbending tournament, and you’re not even an earthbender?”

“Yeah. But it wasn’t technically——“
“Did you win any?” She interrupts.

“Uh, yeah.”

“How many?”

“Two out of four.”

“Half and half,” she says, and if Zuko didn’t know better he might think she sounds impressed. “Not bad. Might just be beginners luck.”

“Why don’t you find out?” He asks, he goads. She seems like the type of person to be goaded — seems like the type of person who needs hard proof, who has spent so long proving herself that she expects no less from anyone else. He can do that; he’s spent his whole life proving himself, too.

Sure enough, she turns in his general direction, eyebrows raised like she can’t believe what she’s hearing, lips curling into something that might be a smile.

“Okay, Half and Half,” she says, and if Zuko wasn’t hundreds of miles away from home and wearing earth kingdom clothes, he might complain about the sudden nickname, “Let’s see what you got.”

“I’m not an earthbender,” he reminds her, one last time, “I could hurt you.”

She scoffs, “You couldn’t hurt me.”

He doesn’t know whether to laugh because she’s so young, she has never in her life been burned, or not. Somehow, despite how ridiculous it sounds, he can’t help but believe her.

She plants her feet into the ground across from him, and he brings his arms up into stance. Let’s see what you’ve learned, he hears his father say. Zuko moves.

He gets his ass handed to him the first round. And the second round. And the third round.

She laughs at him the first time she kicks his ass, grins at him all fucking smug the second time, and tells him her name the third time.

“The name’s Toph,” she says, pointing at herself, like it’s a big secret, “But don’t tell anyone.”

“Who would I tell?” He asks, amused.

“What, you’re not here with anyone?”

“No,” he says, “I’m traveling by myself.”

She snorts, “How the hell have you stayed alive this long, going around asking people to beat you up?”

Zuko shrugs, before he remembers she can’t see it. “Don’t know. Spite, I guess.”

She snorts a laugh at that. “Yeah, I can see that about you.”
It doesn’t sound demeaning or mocking, nothing like Zhao would say to him if the annoying fucker were still alive, so he decides not to be offended.

“What about you?” He asks. “How’d you get into the fighting shit?”

She doesn’t frown, but she does pull back a bit, stance tightening up. Defensive. He hasn’t seen her on the defense yet; she comes at him so aggressively that he’s usually the one doing that.

“I just like it,” she says, “And I’m good at it. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” he says. He gets that — hours of practicing with his swords instead of his bending because the weight in his hands came easier than bending ever did. “You’re definitely good at it. Reigning champion, and all that.”

“Hell yeah, I’m the reigning fuckin’ champion. You might’ve won some of those baby fights back in those other towns, but there’s no way you’ll ever beat me.”

He, one hundred percent, believes her.

“What’s your name, by the way?” She asks.

Zuko panics for a moment; no one had ever asked for his name at any of the other tournaments. No one had cared.

“Um,” he says, mind immediately shooting back to he and Uncle’s night at Song and her mother’s house, and he feels a pang of guilt that he dutifully ignores. “Uh, Li.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “For the record, I know you’re lying,” she says. “Your heart’s beating like crazy, man.”

“Oh,” he says weakly.

“But whatever,” she says, “I don’t know the name of half the guys I lay in the ground, so it doesn’t matter to me. You’re a shitty liar, though.”

“Yeah, I’ve been told.”

She laughs, at him or at his words or whatever, he doesn’t know. He does know it makes him feel — he doesn’t know, lonely? A little sad. He hasn’t heard anyone laugh like that since he was a kid. He doesn’t even remember the last time he or Azula laughed like that. She sounds so young. He wonders, suddenly, who’s daughter she is. Why she’s out here every night instead of at home, if anyone’s missing her right now. But she doesn’t press about who is he or where he’s from, so he doesn’t ask her.

Instead, he asks: “So you feel with your bending? That’s how you know what’s gonna happen without seeing it?”

“I see it,” she says, “Just not the way you see it. I feel the vibrations in the earth in with my bending. So I can see that tree over there, and I can see how far the wall stretches before it turns, and I can feel how fast your heart beats when you lie.”

“Wow,” he says, for lack of a better word; that shit would’ve come in handy for him during his whole potential scar-induced blindness scare three years ago. “That’s incredible.”
“I know. You ready to get your ass beat a fourth time?” She asks, punching a fist into her opposite hand.

“Of course,” he says, and then he does.

“You’re holding out on me,” she says a few nights later, after her latest tournament. She had found him out in the crowd afterwards - said she could feel his weird heartbeat and lighter footsteps or some freaky shit like that - and sighed in an over-exaggerated way that didn’t sound nearly as put upon as she probably wanted it to.

They’re in the middle of it, Zuko’s fucking foot stuck in the ground with him trying to find some way of getting it out that doesn’t involve his bending. He looks up at her, her eyes staring blankly even as they’re squinted in suspicion.

“What d’you mean?” he asks cautiously.

“I mean you’re holding back. While we’re fighting, you’ll go to move some way and then stop yourself halfway through. You did it literally like a second ago. It’s like your body’s doing it instinctively, but you don’t want it to.”

He feels his heart pound harder than it probably should - she really feels fucking everything, he thinks vaguely. And she knows he’s a shit liar, and he knows that she knows. He doesn’t really know that much more about her - if she finds out he’s a firebender, will she just flip her hand and crush him? Will she turn him in? Can he get arrested for that? Cause he’s not just a firebender, he’s a traitor, and he’s got a pretty big sum on his head. Fuck, he doesn’t know. But if some kind of authority gets involved, and he gets recognized - shit. Shit.

“Hey,” Toph is saying, and when he glances up again she’s right in front of him. He steps back on instinct, and then remembers his foot is still stuck. He braces for the way it’ll twist and sprain, but it doesn’t come - the earth rises beneath him, and the vice around his ankle is gone. Agni, that’s smooth bending. “Chill the hell out.”

“What?” he blinks like a dumbass.

“Calm down,” Toph repeats. “All I said was I know you’re holding out on me. You don’t have to freak out.”

“I didn’t freak out,” Zuko snaps, heat rising inexplicably to his face. He’s suddenly grateful she can’t see him - he hasn’t gotten embarrassed in forever. And by a kid, too!

“Your heart sounds like it’s trying to fly away. You’re a shit liar and you freak out too easily.”

“I don’t freak out easily,” he says, taking a deep breath to get his - his heart, he supposes, back under control.

She crosses her arms. “Then what are you holding back, huh? Must be a big deal, if you fr - “

“I didn’t freak out!” Zuko cuts in, scowling when she grins at his outburst.

“Okay, okay,” she relents, putting her hands up in a mockery of giving up, “So what is it? Are you actually an earth bender? No, I woulda caught you lying about it. Your movements did seem kinda like bending, though.”
He opens his mouth, and closes it again. Would he have the upper hand in a fight, if it came to it? He doubts she’s ever fought a firebender before, so he might have some kind of advantage there, even if she could lay him flat if she really wanted to. He might be able to catch her by surprise, but could he? Could he actually bring himself to burn her, if he had to? To introduce that kind of pain to her when she’s obviously never felt it before?

He thinks with sudden clarity that he probably couldn’t. And he can’t, for the fucking life of him, tell if that’s a good or bad thing.

“Does it matter?” he forces himself to say.

“Uh, yeah ,” Toph says loudly, “If you’re holding back, what’s the point? Do you think I can’t handle it or something?”

“That’s not it, alright? Chill the hell out.”

There’s a pause.

“Okay, I won’t tell you to chill out again,” she says, “’Cause that was fucking annoying.”

Despite himself, Zuko huffs out what could’ve been a laugh somewhere else. “Thank you.”

Toph crosses her arms again, shifting her weight, “So what, are you a bender?”

Seeing as he can’t exactly get away with lying, Zuko just shrugs. “Yeah.”

“But not an earthbender.”

“No.”

“You don’t feel like a waterbender.”

“What does that mean?”

Toph shrugs, “I dunno, you just don’t seem like one.” A pause. “…Are you?”

“No,” Zuko admits.

There’s a long pause, where Zuko lets the information process on Toph’s surprisingly expressive face. She looks so young, when she’s not busy being tough. He supposes she’s never had to care about reading people’s faces, so she’s never had to learn to school her own. He gives her the dignity of processing it herself, and looks at the overturned rocks next to her instead.

“So you’re a firebender,” she says. Her voice is surprisingly even.

“Yeah,” he says, and his own voice is surprisingly even, too.

“I guess that makes sense.”

Zuko looks over at her again. Her arms are crossed tighter than before, and her stance has shifted so that her weight is spread evenly, but she doesn’t seem to be on the offensive yet. Zuko doesn’t know what to do with that, so he stays quiet.

She must take his silence as a question. Or maybe she just doesn’t care. “You know, your sparky heartbeat. And how pissed you are all the time.”
“I’m not pissy,” he snaps - always fucking forgetting himself, he hears his father say.

“Point in fucking case,” she says, and she doesn’t sound angry. Why doesn’t she sound angry? “And your name’s definitely not Li. Are all firebenders so bad at lying?”

“No,” Zuko says immediately, thinking of Azula.

“Huh. Just you, then.”

Zuko blinks, at a loss for a moment. “That’s it?”

Toph signs, deep and exasperated. “Yeah, I think that’s it. I don’t know. I know there’s a war going on and all that, but it’s never been a very big part of my life. Are you here to hurt me?”

“N-No,” Zuko stutters, thrown by the mood shift.

“Then yeah, that’s it. I can say I’ve beat a firebender’s ass, now. That’s pretty cool of me.”

Zuko is quiet for a moment. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Toph grins, punching her fist, “Okay, Sparky,” the nickname has changed; he likes this one better, “Stop holding back on me, and lets see if you’re even that good of a firebender.”

Zuko feels this overwhelming rush of fondness for this crazy fucking kid, and he rolls his eyes to stop it from seeping out, even though he knows she can’t see it. “Are you sure? If you’ve never fought a firebender before, I could hurt you.”

Toph scoffs, like she did the first time, and says, “Come on. You know you couldn’t hurt me.”

He does know.

And he’s been dying to see if the shit he’s picked up will actually do any good for him. He pushes down the excitement rising in his chest, and folds into his first stance.

She beats his ass again. But he is learning something, and that’s what he came to do.

“I know you’re still holding back,” she says, grudgingly helping him up off the ground. “But I guess I don’t really wanna get burned. That fire is hot shit.”

End Notes

and then when zuko shows up @ the northern air temple six months later toph is like holy shit..........Li???? you’re ZUKO???? well ig that settles that

drop a comment to help me make bank at work this summer....im so broke....and come bother me whenever

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