“If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?”

“Of course it does,” Aang says quickly, tossing a boulder back through the air and towards Toph. She tosses it back. Zuko waits on another boulder - on the ground - for his turn to work with Aang. “Sound doesn’t stop working when people aren’t around.”

“I don’t know,” Toph says quietly, face downcast and voice strangely serious, at least for her. “Lots of people make noise when the fire nation comes, but no one seems to hear them.”

Zuko doesn’t work on firebending with Aang that day.

i want to be super clear that this isn't necessarily a happy fic. it deals with some pretty heavy topics and none of them should be taken lightly. that said, if you're sensitive to sexual assault or child abuse, this is not the fic for you, especially since the themes are
throughout the entire thing, please stay safe loves!
	his isn't a story meant to glorify anything to do with any of the topics mentioned in the tags or the say people are fine after experiencing trauma. this is meant more like a story saying that no matter what anyone goes through, please know that there are people who will want to listen and care about what happened. recovery isn't a straight line and sometimes being okay just doesn't happen, at least not fast, and that's completely okay.

if anyone is having a tough time i'm always open to lend an ear, and always talk to your loved ones.

that said, enjoy the read and please stay safe loves, okay?

See the end of the work for more notes

"You need to move," Katara tells him.

'You need to move,' a nasal voice repeats in his head, quiet and calm.

Zuko gets out of the way as fast as possible while Katara waterbends into the pot he was just standing over. He stares. Blinks. Shoves the voice into the back of his head to deal with later.

"Thanks," he manages, and judging by the way Katara turns to look at him, she's at least a little concerned. It's a new look for her to direct at him. He must not have sounded okay.

She doesn't say anything, and he's thankful. Really. Mostly, at least. Somehow, he wonders if he would tell her if she asked if he was okay, or what's wrong. He wouldn't, but it would be nice to have someone care, a little. But Zuko's not here to make friends. He's here to train the Avatar so that Aang can kill his father. He's not here for therapy.

Zuko continues to add things to the stew while Katara goes off to do whatever it is she normally does when she's not keeping an obsessive watch over him.

He's fine.

<--><--><--><--><--><--><--><--><-->

Zuko is not okay.

He knows this logically. People who are okay do not wake up every two hours exactly to make sure no one else is near them. People who are okay don't avoid being touched when they're not fighting. People who are okay aren't scared of healers and doctors.

Zuko wakes up every two hours on the dot reflexively to make sure no one comes to close while he's sleeping. It's not healthy, but it allows him to sleep more than three hours a night without being consumed by nightmares of warm nights.

He hates being touched. Unless he's in a fight. Toph's ambiguous (are they friendly or unfriendly?) punches are okay too. Sometimes though, when Uncle would clasp his shoulder or pat his back, it made Zuko's skin tingle like he was being burned. Again.

The healers and doctors all served his father back home. That's reason enough to be terrified of
Katara is a healer. He finds this out in Ba Sing Se in the caves underneath the city. He doesn't really have time to think about it.

When he joins them at the Western Air Temple, he sees her working on Toph's feet. ('Your fault,' the voice hisses.) He has time to think about it after that.

Katara terrifies him. Not more than she ever did before because of her hatred for him, but because she can heal. And Zuko is afraid of healers.

In the middle of the night, the warden comes to Zuko's room.

"How did you capture my niece's heart? And how did she allow you to break it?"

The Warden leans his face close, and even with his own head bowed, Zuko can smell his rotting-flesh breath. He takes a deep breath through his nose. The smell is good. It will keep him grounded.

"Not going to answer, hmm?" the Warden muses.

Zuko doesn't say anything. No matter what he does, he's damned. There's no point in trying to delay it when it can be over with quickly.

"We'll try again tomorrow," the Warden breaths into Zuko's ear, words featherlight, but weighing hundreds of pounds.

Zuko doesn't sleep that night. He sits on his bed and waits until Sokka appears the next morning, plan formed to get Suki and them out.

"I'll tell you more in the courtyard since it'll be less suspicious to have me there than in your cell."

Zuko gets out of there as fast as he can. They have a plan, which means he can leave. Soon. Not soon enough, but soon. That's better than nothing.

"How do you always know what makes me feel good?"

Zuko swallows hard. He doesn't say anything.

Hakoda scares him too. It's the way that he's always so, so kind to his children. It's the way he treats Zuko like he's a human being with feelings and emotions, especially when most people fail at thinking of him with one or the other. It's the way his children cling to him, hang off of his every word.

Zuko wonder's if this is how parents are supposed to treat their children. He wonders if his father ever treated him this way. He's sure that his father has always treated Azula like a daughter, but Zuko has no memories of being treated in that way.

(What his father thinks of Azula, the way he treats her, it's not love. Zuko knows that now. He didn't, before.)
The only real reason Hakoda scares him is that he lets Zuko see what love is.

Zuko's not even sure if his mother loved him. She never did anything to protect him from… well, *him*.

---

Zuko dreams in smells and voices. He hasn't dreamed in any other way for a long time. Zuko doesn't dream often either, and when he does it's always of that moment. The burning and the smell probably won't ever leave him.

Most of the time Zuko is… fine. He's not okay. He hasn't been in a long time and he doesn't think he ever will be again. And everyone knows it.

The others, even Katara, leave him alone most of the time when it comes to things they've noticed throw him off-center. Mostly they never ask questions. It makes it easy to pretend he's okay when he's only fine.

Azula never had to go through what he did because she's perfect. He bets she would smile in glee to think about it happening to him. Somehow, this still doesn't make him hate her.

---

"Did father ever…"

"Did father ever what?" Azula asks sharply. *She's not looking at him. *Honestly Zuko. finish your thought. We're supposed to be at that party as soon as possible."

"Nevermind, I guess," he mumbles.

Azula snorts.

"What a perfectly proper sentence. *How disappointed Mr. Hwan would be."

Zuko doesn't look at her.

"Yeah, disappointed."

---

"If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?"

"Of course it does," Aang says quickly, tossing a boulder back through the air and towards Toph. She tosses it back. Zuko waits on another boulder - on the ground - for his turn to work with Aang. "Sound doesn't stop working when people aren't around."

"I don't know," Toph says quietly, face downcast and voice strangely serious, at least for her. "Lots of people make noise when the fire nation comes, but no one seems to hear them."

Zuko doesn't work on firebending with Aang that day.

---

"Good boy," the man says. "Now do that again."

"Is this love?" Zuko wonders.
If it is, he doesn't like it.

He's eight.

Katara tries to hug him. Zuko can't hug her back, but he lets her until her head is too close to his neck and then he's pushing her away.

She land on the forest floor Appa landed with a thump. Her eyes are wide, filled with emotion and confusion. She stands up quickly and reaches a hand out to Zuko, but before she says anything Zuko has already turned around and bolted.

He can't handle this.

"Don't you want to be loved? Don't you miss your mom?"

Zuko does miss his mom.

"It's okay. I'll always be here for you."

Katara finds him a few hours later. He's sitting on the edges of a river, occasionally tossing small pebbles into it. His eyes are dry.

"Are you okay?" Katara asks.

He chokes on a laugh. No one's ever asked him before. Not even Uncle.

"No," he finally says, tossing another pebble. "I'm not okay."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, I suppose."

"Zuko," she begins, gentle. It's like she's talking to a wounded animal who may bolt at any time. It's probably a fair assessment. She doesn't touch him. "You don't have to tell me, but I'll listen if you ev-"

"You smell like a healer. Like freshwater and bandages and bleached sheets. I just, it's too much for me," he says quickly. The words have been waiting for a chance to burst out for... years. "You smell like... I don't know."

Katara doesn't say anything, but she does scoot a little further away. Zuko still isn't looking at her.

"I was eight, I think. Broken bones and bleached sheets and no one in the room and no one heard him scream after it started even though mother was right outside the door and father must have known and why didn't he stop him and why didn't anyone help and love wasn't supposed to hurt and oh god oh god oh god and stop it and get away and take it- "The royal physician, he really liked me. And I got hurt a lot as a kid."

Katara must fill in the blanks because a moment later she scoots further away again and now Zuko can't smell anything except green and summer and heat.
"When did, when did he stop?" she asks timidly like she's afraid of asking too much and offending him. As if. He wasn't offended when she hated him for weeks.

"After I left." Zuko turns to look at her and smiles wryly.

He doesn't remember the last time it happened. The only reason he knows anything happened is because when he finally woke up on the Wani he was tacky and sticky and he knows that he wasn't before he was burned. Before he was brought to the royal physical for a check to make sure he'd survive being shipped off.

Katara probably doesn't want to know that.

"Did no one…" she can't finish the thought.

Zuko shrugs.

"I don't know."

_I screamed so much at first every time and no one ever came but they must have heard_, he doesn't say. _I gave up after a while. The quieter I was the faster he finished_, he doesn't say. _Eventually, it wasn't just when I was hurt_, he doesn't say. _He'd just come to my room after I was asleep for a few hours_, he doesn't say. _I burned myself accidentally whenever he did it_, he doesn't say. _Uncle doesn't know_, he doesn't say.

"Oh, Zuko," Katara says, quiet. He's glad she's not crying. He's glad no one's wasting tears on him.

"I'm sorry to burden you," he says back, just as quiet. "You don't need to treat me any differently."

"Zuko," she says again.

He finally looks at her, and there are no tears anywhere. Instead, she looks… angry isn't the right word. Hurt? Maybe? Hurt for him? He's not sure exactly what emotion it is.

"Just, it's not a burden. We're friends and you're hurt. I just want you to know it's okay. I'm… I want to help you if you ever need someone to listen." It can stay between us, she doesn't say.

Zuko still hears it loud and clear.

<--><--><--><--><--><-->

That night Zuko sleeps without waking up once or dreaming of anything.

Zuko is not okay.

And that's fine.

Someday, he will be.

End Notes

please, please if anyone notices a tag i'm missing lmk in the comments so i can keep people as safe as possible!
thanks for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!