The déjà vu is immense, and no number of the Water Tribe girl’s desperate assurances—"It’s alright, it’s alright, I know what it looks like, but he’s alive, he’s fine, he’s still in there. It’s just...he won’t be able to move so much anymore”—none of these assurances change the image before him, so similar to one on the worst day of his life.

Zuko lays there on the ground, still like a corpse.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Iroh had forced himself to be calm in those final moments, so many years ago, had gripped Lu Ten’s body tenderly despite having been assured that the boy (the boy, he had only been a boy) would feel no pain at the touch, that he had already lost most of his sensation. Iroh had forced himself not to weep.

Now, there is no such calm. He sprints to Zuko’s form and slides on his knees in the dust of the Coronation Plaza to reach it, snatches it up into his arms before he has even stopped moving. Hugs it to him as tightly as he can, sobs racking his ribs and jostling Zuko in the process, burning tears pouring down his weathered cheeks.

Zuko blinks his eyes rapidly, and Iroh knows him well enough to know what he intends to say, the words he would try—and most likely fail—to get out if he could move his lips: I’m sorry, Uncle, and I know I disappointed you, weak like this, and I know you wanted me to be Fire Lord and I can’t now, not like this, and Don’t cry, Uncle.

“No.” Iroh smiles, and holds Zuko up, positions his nephew’s body and head so that his eyes are facing Iroh’s and so that he can see that smile. “No, my nephew they are tears of joy. I…I feared that I had…sent you to your death when I directed you to fight Azula…And yet here you are, so alive. They are tears of joy.”

It’s not a lie. And yes, there are many questions that still will have to be answered, things that will have to be resolved, in light of this recent development, about how he can best help Zuko in his new nephew's role of Fire Lord. (Because, paralyzed or not, Zuko will still be Fire Lord if it is what he wants, and Iroh will ensure that he is supported, even if it means moving back to the Fire Nation rather than retiring to Ba Sing Se.) Somehow, they will discuss it. Together, they will devise a solution to that obstacle too.

But there will be time for that. Thank Agni, there will be so much time for that. For now, Iroh is content to hold his boy to him, to feel his heart pounding vigorously in his still body.

End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I love comments!

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