

The Spark from the Stone

By Rockingfrog

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No one believes Gero when he tells people he saw something potentially life threatening, so he takes it upon himself to find out the truth. But as his findings unravel deeper secrets, he wonders if anything he knows will ever be the same.

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1 - TEST

Chapter 1 – TEST

As the ground around him started to shake violently, Gero gritted his teeth in determination. The five men stood unfazed in front of him, feeling the movements of the earth and each interpreting them to best effect. Gero was uncertain as to whether the earth's behaviour was controlled by him or one of the other men, but still he searched for cracks beneath him he could use to aid his fight. The man to his far right casually flicked his wrists skyward but it was beneath Gero's leather sandals that the change occurred. He noticed the trembling becoming greater and greater, until suddenly the rock tore upwards, flinging Gero ten feet in the air. As the second man swept his arms across his body Gero erected a similar pillar next to the one he was stood on. Leaping across to his own platform, the original snapped in to as easily a twig and crashed to the ground. Gero spotting his chance, focused on one of the large rocks falling to the ground, and push it towards the two men standing in front of the pillar. Having no time to duck or dodge they felt the full force as the giant stone knocked them down and out.

Muttering a swift self praise Gero lowered himself back down to the same level, his mind churned with ideas of how he could finish off his remaining opponents. Before he could take a grip on the situation, the trembling grew once more. He threw himself backward, just before a massive spike erupted from the ground inches in front of him. Sighing and clambering to his feet, he felt for any disturbances that would signal another attack. All he could do was react, not having enough time to stop the protruding obstacles. Without a break he was constantly on the back foot, and couldn't feel the shifts in the rock below him as effectively. One took him by surprise, and although he did everything he could to avoid it, he could stop the rock tearing a chunk from his calf. Cursing aloud, his taste buds recorded the warm sticky substance coating the inside of his mouth. Wiping away the escaping liquid with the back of his hand, he decided he'd had enough. It was time to fight back.

Picking the spike that had almost skewered him (because it had been made in hurry and was relatively unstable) Gero positioned himself behind it. Feeling the footsteps of the approaching men vibrating in the earth, he waited until they were but a few paces away before throwing his arms upward. With a horrendous crack and an almighty scream, the top half of the spine broke away from its counterpart, suspended in mid-air by the strained effort of the now revealed boy standing behind the spike. Beads of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, racing each other towards the soft material clinging to his back. Rotating his hands round, his gift allowed the spike to mimic his action. With a massive groan, Gero released his hold on the stone. As the two men turned their heads sideways, the pike sliced a way through the air, and they were lost underneath the collapsing rubble.

With a gulp of air and a sigh of relief, Gero concentrated on his last opponent. He had not acted previously during the fight, only observed from the shadows of his hood. Now, as he lifted that selfsame hood off the top of his head and bowed low, a large breath of air caught somewhere in Gero's throat.

He was not shocked by the lack of hair on the man's head, as that was standard practice from all of the city's monks. Neither was it the man's odd behaviour, because in all truth it wasn't odd, just standard practice for opening honourable combat. What struck Gero so strongly was the combination of lines

inscribed on the man`s flat head. In his current position the man was giving Gero a very clear view of the markings, enough so that he could make out certain word like attack and defend. Realising the meaning of the central symbol, Gero could only stare in horror. Mesmerised by the sheer sincerity of the possible situation, he didn`t acknowledge that the man had finished the formalities and planned on having a fight. Noticing the descending darkness all too late, he had time for only one thought before he blacked out; what was the Fire Nation symbol doing on the head of one of the tutors in the Earth Army?

2 - CHANCE

Chapter 2 - CHANCE

Heaped on a chair, Gero sighed silently. It was not the first time he had been here: General Erak's office was the first place all recruits, successful or otherwise, were taken after the Final Test. Besides the infirmary of course.

"Gero," he started, with a voice both booming and gravelly. "I am very disappointed to see you in this position once again. And I am afraid that this is one too many meetings."

"But sir..." Erak's hand was up in an instant. The hand was huge, the fingers wide and the creases looked like they had been chiseled in stone. "You know the rules. A recruit can only take the Final Test five times. This was your fifth attempt. Perhaps you were not meant to join the Earth Army. There are plenty of other worthy professions you could..."

Gero cut through again, this time ignoring the hand, projecting his voice behind it to the General. "Sir you can see from the pattern of my battle that something distracted me."

"Distracted you?" it was Erak's turn to interrupt. "What could have possibly distracted you from the Final Test?"

Gero took a deep breath. "I saw a symbol" His voice had lost all the bravado needed to interrupt Erak and now it was nothing more than a nervous quiver. "On the head of my final opponent, Sensei Zentaro. I am sure it belonged to the Fire Nation."

General Erak's face was hard to read; enough that he was a good poker player. But Gero could plainly see a look of fear creep into the General's face. In a blink it was gone.

"Sensei Zentaro is a trusted teacher and a good friend of mine. There is no way he is a member of the Fire Nation. I've known him for years. How can you suggest such a thing?"

"I know what I saw," Gero said defiantly.

"You were in the middle of the toughest battle of your life so far. With all the excitement I expect your brain may not have seen everything as clearly as it normally would have."

"Are you saying I made it up?"

"I'm saying you may have hallucinated because of all the pressure. It is a rather strange thing to have seen."

And that was it. Gero was told he would not be allowed back into Training Headquarters in the New Year. He was told he would not be accepted into the Earth Army. His fight report was stamped with the word Fail and his file was marked unrecruitable. The General said again how sorry he was and bid him farewell.

Gero walked home a different way. His mum had asked him to buy some fruit from the market, but Gero was just happy to have time to think.

The market was by the Docks. It made sense so traders were near and could bring their cargo ashore quickly. Originally the Major had not wanted Docks in his town. He had said the Earth people would not rely on water for anything. But when they were built and exports increased, he came round to the idea. All the new things that came on the ships pleased the people greatly and Gero's Mum had fallen in love with a particular fruit from the Air Nation.

He was heading towards the stall of the old man with the long, white beard - he sold the fruit - when he heard a rather heated argument down one of the many side alleys. Keeping deathly quiet, Gero ducked

behind a crate and listened carefully.

There were five men. "You imbecile. You've jeopardized our whole mission."

Another voice, "What were you thinking blowing your cover?"

Then a much calmer voice reassured them. "Gentlemen. I was in the middle of a battle. Nobody was watching."

A new voice started. "What about the boy? Is he a threat?"

"The boy?" the calm voice was now almost laughing. "You forget how long we have been planning this. The foolish General trusts me with his life. He would not let a boy try and insult me. Especially one I failed and would want revenge."

This brought silence among the gathering, until the final voice spoke. "If what Tazoren says is true then we will proceed. Everybody is ready so we should start to act." There was a murmuring of agreement. "Then it is settled. We shall move our plan into phase two. It's time to take down the Earth Nation from the inside!"

The group disbanded, each in a different direction. Gero waited until he was sure they were all far away enough so as not to hear him, then ran, and did not stop running until he was home.

"Did you get that fruit..." his mum started, but she trailed off when she saw how flustered her son was.

"You didn't pass the test did you? Don't worry. And don't worry about the fruit either. I'll make you something nice. You go to your room and get changed."

Gero went but only collapsed on his bed. He could only think of the conversation. They had been talking about what had happened in his fight. And he was sure of it. Without a doubt. He had sat through five years of his lessons. The calm voice belonged to Sensei Zentaro.

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