Prince Iroh
by Acastus

Summary

After narrowly escaping capture by Azula in "The Avatar State", Iroh and Zuko travel the Earth Kingdom in disguise. On the road they save a scatologically obsessed merchant from a group of bandits and are invited to a feast as a reward. At dinner, a storyteller relates the tale of the rise and fall of Prince Iroh. Much older and wiser, Iroh is forced to relive his past in front of an audience of the enemy, and Prince Zuko learns the answers to many questions he never bothered to ask about his guardian.

This is a story of Iroh's youth at a time when the Fire Nation was losing the war against a resurgent Earth Kingdom. Fire Lord Azulon, fearing both defeat abroad and rebellion at home, sends Prince Iroh to the Earth Kingdom under the leadership of his elder cousin, Prince Xian. The new army boasts terrifying new weaponry, but they face the greatest general in Earth Kingdom history and his mighty Army of the Granite Mountains.
The Orchard

Iroh stood up and wiped his sweaty brow with a rag. It was nearly sunset as he looked out over the orchard. The other day laborers were picking their last peaches and organizing their baskets to be counted. It had been many a year since he had asked his body to engage in such physical activity, and he would pay for it tomorrow. For the moment, however, he simply stank of hard work and the green earth.

Footsteps from behind alerted him to the presence of his nephew, “Here, uncle, I’ve finished three more.”

Iroh stepped lightly out of the way as the banished Prince dropped three full baskets of peaches, one stacked on top of the other, next to the others they had collected.

“Excellent! Let’s count up and see what we have.” Iroh quickly summed up the baskets in front of them. “These plus the ones we gave to the Overseer this morning should give us almost two gold pieces. That should be enough for us to move on to someplace where we can relax for a while.”

“How do you figure that, my corpulent friend?” came a smooth voice from behind them. “By my calculation you’re due a total of nine silver pieces.”

Iroh and Zuko turned to locate the source of the hated voice. They had known the Overseer less than three days and even Iroh had come to hate him. His long, angular nose and piercing, hawk like eyes seemed to be on everyone at once. He never spoke except to demean, and never acted if not to cheat, abuse or humiliate. The day before he had beaten a laborer with a whip and thrown him off the estate for accidentally dropping a basket of peaches into the pond.

“What do you mean?” growled Zuko. “We handed in 41 baskets this morning and we have, uh… how many do we have here, uncle?”

“We have 36 more, and some of them are those tart yellow ones that are everyone’s favorite!”

The Overseer’s eyes locked with Zuko’s and a cruel grin spread over his face, he motioned to one of the two large men behind him, “Jin, the book. Now.” The muscular mute handed over a small leather book which the Overseer opened without examining, instead keeping his gaze on Zuko.

“My records say you only handed in 28, and receiving says here that 11 of those were bruised.” He snapped the book shut for emphasis. “So sorry, gutter filth, but we’re not paying for fruit we can’t sell. That’s means you –”

Zuko’s knuckles connected with the Overseer’s face before Iroh or the bodyguards could react. With a cry his other fist connected with the Overseer’s neck. Iroh rushed forward, shouting, “No, nephew, stop! Stop!” Staggering backwards the cruel man collapsed to his knees as his bodyguards rushed forward to engage the banished Prince.

“Get them! Get them you fools! Don’t kill them, I want them alive!” screamed the Overseer, still struggling to regain his breath.

The mute guard launched a clumsy fist at Zuko, but was easily blocked as the Prince grabbed his assailant by the wrist. A quick twist followed by a sickening snap was enough to drop the mute to his knees in silent agony, tears streaming down his face. Zuko then turned to his other opponent, only to see Iroh, in a move far more graceful than his form seemed to allow, flip the man over his shoulder and knock him out with a palm blow to the forehead. Iroh straightened up once again, his work done...
for the second time that day and turned to his nephew.

“This was not wise.”

“I don’t care – and I’m not done either.” replied Zuko, fire still in his voice as he turned to where the Overseer had fallen.

A quick scan of the trees and the upward slope on which they grew revealed nothing. The Overseer had beaten a hasty retreat. Around the pair, a small group of onlookers was quickly gathering. Some gazed with wonder and fear at the fallen tormentors, others looked with amazement or anger at the Fire Nation exiles. One of the laborers, a middle aged man with several missing teeth, approached them.

“You two had better go before this crowd decides to turn ya in.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Zuko incredulously, “We just punished the people who lie and cheat them everyday.”

Scratching his sideburn the onlooker replied, “Every one of us has wanted to do what ya done here, but we’ll all pay for it too. That bastard’ll be back with more guards. So, I’d say you should forget about what you’re owed and leave now before these people here decide to turn y’all in.”

Iroh bowed in response, saying, “Thank you for your wisdom, friend.” Then, grabbing Zuko by the arm, “Let’s go – now.”

The pair fled the orchard, leaving behind the incapacitated guards and the angry, fearful crowd of the powerless. Twilight was upon them by the time they reached the road at the edge of the estate. Iroh leaned against a tree upon gaining the road, breathing heavily with the exertion. Zuko appeared next and sat down heavily on the side of the road.

“I’m sorry, uncle. Attacking that fool wasn’t worth endangering us – and those peasants weren’t worth saving.”

Regaining his breath, Iroh replied, “Those people live without hope, Prince Zuko. As low as you have fallen, you have always had hope. Do not be so eager to judge.” The retired general then turned and walked past Zuko without looking at him, “We must keep going. The Overseer is a vengeful man and will pursue us.”

Zuko, now walking beside him sneered, “Let him come. Alone on this road I will burn him alive and laugh.”

“I see you haven’t learned the value of temperance, nephew.”

“And you are too soft, uncle!” Replied Zuko hotly, fixing his uncle with a hard glance from his maimed eye, “How can you bear this humiliation day after day with that ridiculous smile plastered on your face? We are royalty and yet we have become beggars and day laborers. I was to become Fire Lord, and now I am little better than the slaves we just left! It isn’t fair.”

Zuko’s voice trailed away as he spoke, his anger turning to depression and self pity.

“Life isn’t fair, Prince Zuko. I know this – better than you.”

The two moved quickly along the road in silence. Twilight descended rapidly into night, and soon a waxing moon appeared over the horizon. Clear and bright, the pale orb cast its ghostly pallor across the uneven surface of the dirt road before them. Ahead they spied a bend in the road and heard the
sound of rushing water beyond it. Behind them another bend in the road obscured the way they had come.

As they approached the water, another sound caused them to stop their jog mid step. Straining to identify the source, the ground began to vibrate slightly.

“Horses, uncle! From behind!”

“Hide – quickly.”

Both disappeared into the brush beside the road a moment before a barouche carriage rounded the bend behind them. Pulled by four ostrich horses, the carriage itself was decorated richly with ornate, black lacquered wood and gold leaf. Dangling from its roof were two, intricately carved lanterns that glowed brightly from within. As Iroh and Zuko lay flat on the ground by the roadside they were unable to see the driver or the occupants, but it was clear that even the wheels were inlaid with gold as they rolled slowly by them.

The pair sprang from their hiding places as the carriage began to turn the corner out of sight. No sooner had this happened when a loud crash was heard, followed by coarse shouting and loud curses. Iroh and Zuko cast sidelong glances at each other, then hurried forward at a run.

Charging around the bend they were greeted by a picturesque view of the ornate barouche stopped on a bridge that arched over a small, noisy brook. Its passage was blocked by a chain pulled taught across the end of the bridge. Four malevolent looking figures surrounded the carriage. One of them mounted the box as Iroh and Zuko approached and dragged down the driver, who screamed in terror. Another walked up to the door of the carriage and began to shout at it.

“Come out, you! I see you in there!”

A booming voice from inside the barouche replied, “I don’t give a damn what you want, you scum –”

The voice was cut off as the scoundrel punched out the frosted glass window that served as the top half of the carriage’s door. The sounds of a struggle ensued as Iroh and Zuko reached the scene. A moment later the lead scoundrel backed out of the carriage, pulling out its single occupant with him. He was easily three hundred pounds and dressed in rich clothing, outrageously colored. An enormous jewel hung from a chain around his neck and several of his fingers were festooned with rings.

“I’ll have you idiots horse whipped for this!” shouted the rotund man.

The bandit cocked back his arm to aim a blow at his defiant target, but it was never thrown. For the second time that day, Zuko’s knuckles connected solidly against another man’s face. The scoundrel’s head snapped back at the impact and he lurched drunkenly against the side of the barouche. Another drew a short sword and lunged at Iroh, but the retired general took the sword with ease and casually stabbed his assailant in the hand. With that, the melee was over almost as soon as it had begun. Cursing loudly and screaming in pain, the shadowy men ran headlong into the forest beside the road.

Iroh walked over and helped the driver to his feet, who though clearly shaken, was unhurt. Zuko removed the chain blocking the path of the carriage, then returned to stand by his uncle.

Booming laughter was heard as the fat man addressed them, “Well met, friends!” The traveler walked over and bowed low to the exiles, “I am Trimazu, the merchant! Thank you both for helping me out against that fascist scum!” As he brushed off his robe he continued, “Ha! Fifty gold pieces
says they were Fire Nation, too. They’re all fascist!”

Iroh coughed, and, after stealing a sidelong glance at his fuming nephew, replied, “You are most welcome, sir.”

After straightening his robe, Trimazu examined his newfound acquaintances with a practiced eye. Suddenly he leaned forward and sniffed.

“Whew! Yeh, you two stink like an outhouse! Day laborers right?” Before they could answer he continued, his voice animated and bursting with both arrogance and mischief, “Excellent! Excellent! As a further token of my generosity, how would your stomachs feel about partaking in the Planter’s Moon feast I am throwing tonight?”

“No, thank you. I’m afraid our journey will not wait,” came Zuko’s icy reply. He turned to leave, but was stopped by Iroh’s hand on his shoulder.

“Feast?” Grinning widely, Iroh, with a low bow of his own, continued smoothly, “We would be delighted to accept your generous offer, Lord.”

“Lord? Well, you’re welcome any time you like! Now get in. You’re going to have the best night of your lives! My parties are always the best and the entertainment? Oh the entertainment! The feasts at my abode are the stuff of legend from Ogasawara to Guangzhu! Come friends! Get in!”

Sighing audibly, Zuko boarded the carriage, his uncle close behind. Trimazu boarded last, and with a final shouted instruction to the driver, the carriage barreled once again down the moonlit road.
The Merchant of Shanxi

Chapter Summary

Iroh and Zuko endure the antics of their obese benefactor as they ride to his home for the feast.

The carriage continued on its journey along the moonlit road. Inside, Iroh and Zuko sat opposite their host on seats made of crushed, red velvet. The road was unpaved and full of potholes, but the ride within the coach was smooth.

“And what are you two called?” inquired the merchant, settling his enormous bulk on the seat.

“Oh, my name is Li and this is my uncle—“

“Xian,” cut in Iroh, shooting a self satisfied grin at his nephew.

“Good, good! Now, when we get to the house, please don’t stand on ceremony for me! We have more in common than you know. Twenty years ago I was a day laborer like you! Yes, I know it is hard to believe, but it’s true. So no matter how bad things are, don’t despair! Someday, if you work smart and you’re lucky, you could end up like me!”

“We can only hope, Lord!” replied Iroh, raising his voice in a vain attempt to cover the snort of disdain that erupted from his nephew. “May I ask,” continued the retired general, “how many people will be at the feast?”

“A wondrous question – and I shall answer! My guest list is the most extensive in the four plains region.” Trimazu leaned forward and eagerly began counting off the guests on his fingers, “We’ll have two ex governors of Shanxi province, half a dozen local magistrates, every property owner worth the name for forty leagues and the Minister of the Interior all the way from Ba-Sing-Se! Haha! And do you know what they all have in common? I’ll tell you! They owe me money! Huge, whopping loads of it! So don’t worry about your clothes or your scar young man – I see you trying to hide your face over there.”

Zuko looked up at this comment, an expression of dull hatred etched upon his face.

“Nothing to be bashful about!” the merchant continued confidently, ignoring the Prince’s ill concealed anger, “When they see you are my guests these unctuous fools will line up to kiss your beggar’s arse, I promise you! We’ll get a good laugh at them, eh?"

“Uh, yes, Lord, I daresay we will,” replied Iroh.

“Everyone there except us will be noblemen of one sort or another, but don’t be intimidated by their fancy dress and flowery words! Hehe, I can buy and sell every one of them and they know it. So don’t feel out of place or inferior to these people, that’s what they expect – don’t give them the satisfaction! Just enjoy yourselves!”

Without stopping to catch a breath, the merchant boomed expansively, “Oh, and don’t hesitate to pass wind at dinner if you feel the need, my friends. Why, last year at some feast or another I almost did myself a harm trying to hold up a mighty blast! Better to suffer a little malodorous inconvenience
Iroh, horrified, and desperately trying to ignore the strangling noises escaping Zuko’s lips, replied uncertainly, “Uh, yes! Sounds, uh… liberating!”

Delighted, the fat man pointed an agreeable finger at Iroh and replied, “Exactly! Just the right word – liberating! See how much we have in common?” Zuko flinched visibly as the merchant continued, “I say let the Fire Nation fascists blow themselves to bits trying to restrain wind during their interminable ceremonies!” Then, adding in a conspiratorial tone, “You know, I hear tell that the court of the Fire Lord spends six or seven hours every day in some kind of ceremony! Receptions, audiences and the like! Every day!”

“Oh, more I should think,” commented Iroh automatically.

Without registering Iroh’s remark, Trimazu continued his musing, “I bet that’s why old Azulon died! Wind, I tell you!”

Then, as if emerging from a trance, the fat man began to quickly look through the windows on each side of the carriage.

“Anyway, what the hell is going on here? My mother could walk faster than this and she’s been dead for fifteen years. Okay, hold on a minute…” at this the merchant got up and stuck his head and torso out of the broken window and began to shout at the driver. Trimazu’s ample behind wiggled vigorously within inches of Zuko’s face as the tirade against his servant gathered momentum.

Zuko, aghast, and trying desperately to avoid the acrobatics of the merchant’s rear end, leaned over to Iroh and whispered urgently, “Uncle, you can’t expect me to sit through a meal with this…this pig! He’s loud, obnoxious, and obsessed with bodily functions!”

“Consider the alternative, Prince Zuko. Would you rather travel all night on foot and risk capture?”

“Yes! We have nothing to fear from –,” Zuko’s emphatic reply was rudely interrupted by the merchant’s back end slamming into his face.

Trimazu finished extricating himself from the window frame and turned around, saying, “Your pardon, Li! I had to set my driver straight there.” The carriage indeed sped up as Trimazu sat down, facing them once again, and continued, “He’s a good man, but not too bright. Don’t want to keep the guests waiting too long – fashionably late is just fine, but ya can’t miss the whole damn thing. There’s a limit to the patience even of these greedy pikers!”

Curiosity getting the better of him, Iroh inquired, “Lord, if you hate these nobles so much, why do you have them as guests?”

“Ah! Well spoken! Because it’s good business. They despise me as much as I do them, but we profit mightily from each other. Of course,” he leaned over and once more adopted his conspiratorial tone, “truthfully, I delight in every opportunity to stick it to the nobility! Haha! Pallid, devious worms, the lot of them! I love embarrassing those who put on airs and think themselves better than everyone else! Pshaw! I put on airs, to be sure, but I hold myself in no more regard than you or my driver!”

“Indeed, Lord, that seems just as far as I can tell,” commented Iroh dryly.

Iroh grimaced as Trimazu slapped him on the knee and boomed, “You’re a good man, Xian! You and your nephew will feast well tonight. Soon we shall arrive at the summer house where the feast is to be held!”
Unable to restrain himself, Zuko asked acidly, “And what about those nobles who lead Earth Kingdom armies against the Fire Nation? Are they worms too?”

“No,” came the suddenly serious reply, “They are better men than I! Yet all I can do for them is perfect my industry as best I may. The entire output of my mines and blacksmiths is consumed by the army – may the spirits grant them victory over the red tide that threatens to drown us all! I hope for the best on that score, though I fear the hope of the world now rests solely with the Avatar.”

The barouche sped on into the night. Turning off the main road, the coach entered an open gate guarded by a stone watchtower. They continued along a winding, though well maintained, path deep into the merchant’s sprawling summer home estate. Despite the ridiculous speed at which the driver now propelled them, it was still the better part of an hour before they reached the brightly lit villa.

Trimazu’s summer home was an enormous edifice whose main entrance was composed of bronze double doors almost two stories high. The doors were flanked by two enormous fire pots and two guards in green who bowed as the merchant’s party passed quickly inside. The drive was packed full of carriages and litters of varying sizes parked in neat rows – it was obvious that many if not all the guests had arrived.

They were ushered into the front entrance hall by two servants who busied themselves helping the merchant out of his heavy outer robe. All three of them removed their shoes upon entering, upon which a servant set them carefully beside the main door. Zuko stood erect, his arms crossed, staring defiantly at Trimazu, who failed utterly to take notice.

Iroh looked down at his own soiled clothing and began, “May my nephew and I wash before joining the feast, Lord?”

“Oh, no my friends!” cried Trimazu as he finished donning a vest of black material shot with threads of gold, “There’s no time for that! The feast will taste no worse for your stench, I guarantee! Besides, it pleases me to know that my noble guests will have a chance to enjoy the aromatics of those who engage in such hard labor on their behalf! Haha! Let’s go!”

Iroh groaned, but followed the merchant deeper into the house. Zuko walked alongside in stony silence.

“Remember, Prince Zuko,” Iroh whispered, “to contain yourself, whatever happens. This is not the time to dwell on one’s pride.”

“I can think of no greater humiliation, uncle,” Zuko replied in a low, threatening voice, “than to be used as some kind of cheap prop for a mindless, baboon of an ex-slave to ridicule his betters. We can’t possibly sink any lower than this.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”
Chapter Summary

The Master Storyteller appears at the end of the feast and begins to tell the tale of Prince Iroh...

They stopped and Trimazu threw open a sliding panel in front of them to reveal a long hall filled with perhaps a hundred men and women in colorful dress. A group of musicians played peaceful music on a variety of wind instruments somewhere out of sight. Three long, low tables were set up as three sides of a rectangle that ran up and down a large part of the hall. The guests were standing in small groups chatting idly with each other as the host’s party entered.

“Welcome, friends and associates!” boomed the merchant. All eyes turned to him as he swept into the hall. The unseen musicians halted their playing as the master of the house and his companions approached the head of the table. Once in front of his seat, the merchant bowed low and continued his address.

“My apologies for arriving late, but I was accosted on my return from the auction by a group of bandits. I think somebody here thought they could get out of paying what they owe me!” he put his hands on his thunderous hips and queried, “Now who here is going to fess up to it, eh?”

Iroh was astonished to hear most of the guests begin to laugh at the merchant’s outrageous accusation. In the Fire Nation such a comment would have undoubtedly caused a riot followed closely by the sudden appearance of a pile of flaming corpses. The retired general wondered in silence at the strange people who inhabited the Earth Kingdom.

“All right, dear guests, please sit down and stuff yourselves! Xian, Li – sit here on my right! You’re my guests of honor. It’s all right; you’re only displacing my neighbor, Chen Ho.” The merchant sat down heavily, crossing his legs and motioning with both hands for the servants on either side of the room to begin serving.

Now that the host had seated himself, the guests moved to follow suit. Iroh sat on Trimazu’s right, his nephew in turn beside him.

“You’ve sunk to a new low, Trimazu, a feat even for you!” came an infuriated voice from behind them.

Laughing, Trimazu turned and replied, “Chen Ho! How wonderful to hear your voice! What an honor it is to have the patriarch of the noble Ho family attend my feast! Now, you should be honored to meet these people – judging from where we met I’d say they were working your peach orchard today. This is Xian and his nephew, Li, and they’re from, uh,” the merchant turned to Iroh to inquire, “Where are you from?”

“Oh, we are, uh, refugees from Omashu,” supplied Iroh.

Chen Ho, a tall, gray haired man with a long, drooping moustache, looked briefly at the two exiles as if they were insects.
“This is an outrage.” Chen remarked flatly.

“In every possible way,” remarked Zuko, softly enough that only Iroh could hear.

“Oh, peace, my friend!” replied Trimazu, holding up his hands in defeat. “These men saved me from bandits on my way here tonight, and it is only just that I reward them with a seat of honor. So, go sit next to Li over there, or I’ll rethink my decision to exchange your enormous debt to me for a share in your failing bakery business!”

Fuming, Chen Ho, hesitated. His cheeks flushed red at Trimazu’s indiscreet revelation regarding his personal finances. The closest guests had finished seating themselves. Many, including, it would appear, Governor Tao and a few others nearby were starting to look over at the scene with interest. Chen turned without another word and took the seat next to the banished Prince.

The merchant leaned over to Iroh, poured him some tea, and remarked in a whisper of barely suppressed glee, “I never tire of abusing that snob! His family owned my father!”

The guests had now seated themselves. A small army of servants were busy placing huge plates of food on the tables. Iroh grinned as small bowls of steamed rice, large bowls of spiced noodles, exotic fruits and platters of roast duck and cured ham were placed near him. Each guest was poured a glass of wine in preparation for the toast that Trimazu gave in honor of the Earth Spirit. The harvest had been abundant last year and the mood in the room, withstanding even Trimazu’s coarse humor, was generous.

Iroh served himself large helpings of everything in reach as the feast began in earnest. Servants brought along many small dishes of raw fish wrapped in rice, breads and vegetables. A sip of the tea confirmed that this was a delicious ginseng. After satisfying his immediate hunger, Iroh noticed his nephew sitting impassively at his side.

“You had best eat something. It maybe a long time before we eat like this again. Besides, the food is delicious! Eat, Prince Zuko, even you cannot fight on an empty stomach.”

Zuko was in fact starving. He met his uncle’s eyes briefly, then, with a slight shake of his head in resignation, began to eat.

Iroh had just finished another cup of tea, when the merchant turned to him and said, “Xian, this is Tao Lin, former governor of this province.” Trimazu leaned back to allow Iroh a line of sight to the man sitting on his left. Tao’s face was angular and chiseled, and though clearly middle aged, his body was in good condition.

Tao smiled, bowed slightly in place, and began, “Greetings, Xian. Trimazu has just told me of you and your nephew’s heroics tonight. It isn’t often one hears of freedmen who have such skill in combat. You come from Omashu. Tell me, were you soldiers of King Bumi?”

Iroh’s eyes widened at the question. He bought a few moments by slurping up the noodles left in his cup. Zuko leaned back and regarded his uncle calmly; a slight smile the only indication of his amusement at his uncle’s discomfort. The retired general then replied, “No, Governor, my nephew and I sold wares from a shop cart in the market. We left as soon as we heard that the, uh, “fascists” were nearing the city.”

Governor Tao looked disappointed, “A shame. I was hoping for news of the city’s fall. Many rumors have spread that King Bumi surrendered Omashu without a fight – which I find hard to believe.”

“Believe it,” interjected the merchant, “And it isn’t Omashu anymore, that bitch, Princess Azula, has
renamed it “New Ozai City!”"

Zuko looked over in surprise at Trimazu at this and blurted out, “Azula in Omashu! What was she
doing there?”

Trimazu turned to Zuko and his eyes disappeared beneath his bangs, for this was the first time Zuko
had spoken to the fat man since the bridge.

“Well, Li, glad you decided to join the conversation! I heard all this from one of my suppliers who
used to have operations there, and I asked him the same question. He said he heard she was there to
see a friend. I don’t believe that for a second though.”

Leaning toward them, he continued in his conspiratorial tone, “From what I hear that girl is a demon
from hell sent to torment the whole world. I’d bet my weight in gold there’s not a soul on earth that’d
piss on her if she were on fire!”

Tao and Iroh laughed at this, and so, though very much against his will, did Zuko. It was a bitter
laugh, but a laugh all the same, for of course, he would have given anything for what the merchant
said to have been true. As it was, everyone he cared about save his uncle favored his sister over him.

“Anyway, sounds like you have a crush on her or something! I hear she’s beautiful, if cruel. Still, I
doubt she’d be interested in you. Tao has a good looking daughter your age, though!” Trimazu
turned back to his other guest with wide, expectant eyes, “What do you say, Tao?”

“My daughter is not marrying a freedman, Trimazu,” replied Tao, stiffly.

“Oh, bull! If I offered you two hundred thousand for her to marry Li here your only concern would
be how to get the loot home without getting mugged! And no – don’t ask me about it later, because
I’m not really making an offer.” Trimazu laughed and continued, “Anyway, my supplier also told me
that Princess Azula basically threw out the Governor appointed by her father – after publicly
humiliating him!” Trimazu slapped Tao roughly on the back, “Be thankful you aren’t Governor of
Omashu, my friend!” Tao grimaced at the physical contact, but refrained from the smart reply he
might otherwise have delivered.

Zuko slipped back into his sullen silence after this exchange, but proceeded to eat his fill without
further restraint. After he had finished eating, Zuko felt his eyelids grow heavy, as his body
registered both the day’s labor and the food he had just eaten. Just when Prince Zuko thought the
feast would never end, however, the merchant stood up and addressed his guests once more.

“I have a special treat in store for us. As everyone knows, I spare no expense for my parties and
tonight shall prove no exception. I have paid an obscene amount of money to have Gao Xingjian, the
storyteller, here with us tonight.”

Trimazu clapped his hands together and a wall panel opened to his left. Through the open door
strode an old, thin man in a plain green robe. As the merchant resumed his seat next to Iroh, many of
the guests looked upon the old man with wonder, impressed despite themselves. Gao walked around
the end of the table closest to him and then came to stand in the center of three tables.

Bowin low, Gao greeted his host, “I thank you, Master Trimazu, for your generous introduction.”
The storyteller straightened up and turned to address the guests in an affected voice, saying,
“Greetings, noble lords. Many of you already know of me as the most famous teller of tales in the
eastern lands. I have entertained kings in Omashu, generals in Ba-Sing-Se, the noble rulers of the
North Pole, and yes, even in the palace of the Fire Lord in my youth. I am honored to be your
servant this evening. Please, lords, tell me your desires, your secret longings and I shall fulfill them.
What tales can I tell to gladden your hearts, elevate your spirits and free your minds?"

Gao ended his short soliloquy with a hand raised to the ceiling in a dramatic gesture. He looked around him making quick eye contact with members of his audience. After a few moments of silence several audience members spoke up at once.

“How about how the return of the Avatar?” asked a middle aged man to Gao’s left.

“Or the siege of Ba-Sing-Se?” said another.

Zuko’s weariness vanished as he looked over at his uncle with wide eyes. Iroh sat expressionless. He met Zuko’s eyes briefly then refocused on the storyteller.

“Bah!” interjected Trimazu, “how many times have you heard those! If you wanted to hear something like that you might as well have me get up there and tell it!” Many in the crowd looked aghast at the mere mention of such a possibility, but the merchant barreled ahead without notice, “Come, friends, challenge him! He’s costing me a bloody fortune, don’t waste it!”

Gao replied to the audience members who had spoken, saying, “Thank you, good sirs. Both are worthy subjects. As to the former, Rumor, the omnipresent spirit who walks wherever man treads, has spread the tale of the Avatar’s return far and wide. Even I, however, who have traveled the world, cannot attest to the truth of these stories. As for the latter, the siege of Ba-Sing-Se and General Iroh’s defeat within the very walls of our mighty capital is indeed a spectacular tale. It is also, however, a well worn story which I am sure everyone here has heard recounted many times before.”

Governor Tao then spoke, “Ba-Sing-Se is a moth-eaten tale, I grant, but I would hear tell of a Fire Nation defeat tonight if I can manage it. I have not heard the story of the Battle of Lake Myojin and the end of Prince Xian in many years. Would that suit?”

Gao’s white eyebrows disappeared under his brows and a smile lit his face, “Indeed, Lord – it is an excellent choice. The story of the ill fated cousin of Iroh and Ozai is a good one. The fall of Prince Xian, however, is but a piece of the larger tale that I shall tell, for I know many things about that episode which are not common knowledge.”

“If you wish to hear of disaster and defeat within the very organs of the Western Power that threatens us even today, we must go back before that famed battle and hear also of many events after its conclusion. And yet I must warn you, Lord Governor, that what I give with one hand, I must take away with the other. To tell the tale I have in mind, we must not only be present at Lake Myojin, but at the lamented Battle of Mequon as well.” Then, turning to Trimazu, “May I proceed, Lord?”

“Yes!” cried Trimazu and clapping his hands together in excitement, “I know where this is going, and it sounds too juicy to pass up. Let’s hear about old Iroh’s misfortunes then!”

Zuko’s gasp was cut short before it became audible by Iroh’s strong grip on his wrist from underneath the table.

“Then let us begin. Of the events I will relate, some are well known, others known to but a few. Tonight we follow the life of one man, a man whose life has touched each of ours in some way, whether we realize it or not.”

“The Battle of Lake Myojin is part of the sad tale of General’s Iroh early public life. Yes, long before he came to be called the “Dragon of the West,” General Iroh, conqueror of Xinhua and victor of the Battle of Five Forks and a hundred other campaigns, was then Prince Iroh, eldest son of Fire Lord Azulon.”
“All here know of Prince Iroh’s infamous duel with his step brother, the hated Prince Tien Shin. How he spent seven long years in exile on the island of Planasia before his father released him to serve in the army once more. Most believe that the hatred between Iroh and Tien Shin, a hatred exaggerated by years of intense conflict, had simply erupted into violence upon their return from the Earth Kingdom. But this is not so! Tonight you shall learn the true cause of their infamous duel.”

“Does this tale interest you, lords?”

The guests, clearly intrigued to learn something new about their legendary antagonist, murmured its assent, and the storyteller began anew.

“Thirty years ago, at a Harvest Moon feast much like this one we enjoy tonight, when Prince Xian of blessed memory, yet lived…”
Chapter Summary

The story in the past begins. At a feast thirty years before the present, Fire Lord Azulon charges his nephew, Prince Xian, with the task of leading a new Fire Nation army to invade the Earth Kingdom. Prince Iroh and his rival, Prince Tien Shin, are assigned to accompany him.

Prince Iroh felt certain the feast had gone on forever. His mother, when alive, had tried diligently to persuade him that such feasts were somehow enjoyable. The truth was that the endless ceremonies of the palace bored the young Prince to tears. Though he loved his mother and mourned her passing, Iroh always regarded her efforts in this regard as a complete waste of time.

The Harvest Moon Feast had earned a special place of disfavor in Iroh’s heart. While the exaggerated obeisances and sycophantic adulation of the arriving guests were no worse at this event than at any other Fire Nation high holiday, the Harvest Moon Feast did bear a unique distinction. In addition to its role as a celebration marking the end of the growing season, it was also the anniversary of the aging Fire Lord’s great naval victory over the Earth Kingdom some twenty years prior.

Consequently, Iroh reflected bitterly, every Harvest Moon Feast since then had been ruined by his father’s insistence on dragging some wine soaked yarn-spinner out of his tavern and forcing him to recount the tale. This year had proven no exception. The storyteller that had been imported all the way from Yantai was so boring that Iroh thought he was going to gnaw off his own limbs in frustration.

Struggling to stay awake, Iroh surveyed the scene around him. He and his family sat at three long, low tables set up on the dais. The tables formed three sides of a rectangle. The storyteller stood in the center of the rectangle, the floor of which was painted with an ornate map of the world.

His elder cousin, Xian, who sat to his right, somehow managed to enjoy it all and never ceased to encourage Iroh to approach such situations with equanimity. As the feast entered its eighth hour, however, Iroh rehearsed in his head exactly what he intended to tell Xian he could do with his equanimity.

Xian regarded his cousin over the lip of his tea cup and smiled at his sour expression.

“You will survive this, cousin, I promise,” murmured Xian.

“Oh yes, I’ll live, but I won’t enjoy it,” Iroh replied quietly, failing to suppress a smile.

Xian was five years older than Iroh and already had a successful military career. He had spent four years with General Shu, commander of the Army of the Song River. Together they had fought several campaigns in the southern Earth Kingdom and done much to reverse the Fire Nation’s declining fortunes there. Ozai, Iroh’s younger brother, had accompanied Xian late in his tour, but had chosen to remain with Shu in hopes of laying siege to Omashu in the coming year.

As coldly ambitious as his younger brother was proving to be, he was not Iroh’s main source of imperial anxiety. His eyes slid past his cousin to rest on the ever more frequent object of his anger.
and disdain. Prince Tien Shin, less than a year his senior, sat at the table across from him. Tien Shin grinned smugly back. Iroh grimaced internally and wondered what his hated rival might have in store. Let him grin! Some day he would cut that vile sycophant’s head off with one of his own war fans. And if Iroh did not do it himself, he felt sure that one his friends, probably either Nikon or Gan, would.

Tien Shin hated Nikon in particular for allegedly stealing the attentions of his favorite courtesan. When Iroh had confronted Nikon over the latter his friend had causally replied, “Oh, there’s nothing ‘alleged’ about it.”

Abandoning these thoughts, Iroh averted his eyes from his nemesis as the storyteller finally granted the audience mercy by ending his monologue.

Addressing Xian and Iroh, the storyteller began to wind down, “Sons of Fire! Remember well the Feast of the Harvest Moon. For nineteen years ago this day the hopes and dreams of Ch’in the Conqueror were vanquished forever by the son of Sozin.”

“Now you must finish the grand enterprise that the Lord of the Comet began and which your glorious father advanced to the brink of fruition. Know this, Princes of the Empire, before your lives are spent, the Fire Nation’s struggle to bring order and civilization to the world will be over! Whether the blood of our people will have been spent in vain will hang on your deeds. Bring glory and honor to the Fire Nation and your names will be remembered beside your forefathers!”

Turning to Fire Lord Azulon the storyteller bowed deeply and concluded, as if reciting a formula, “May your reign be long and glorious, Lord Azulon, and may the Spirit of the Sun grant you victory.”

Iroh sighed inwardly with relief as the storyteller retreated from the dais where the Fire Lord and his family sat. All eyes turned to Azulon as he began to speak. He was a tall, thin man with grey hair that was now turning white. His face was hard and cruel, and his countenance spoke of an iron will weighed down by worldly cares. His second wife, Lady Ila, sat next to him.

“My reign has been long,” he began slowly, “but for many years it has not been glorious.” His eyes met briefly with those around the table before he continued.

“Stories are worth the retelling only for what they teach us. Remembrance of past victories serve only to show the miserable situation we now face.”

Iroh and Xian looked quickly at each other as the aging Fire Lord rose from his seat. They began to rise along with everyone else as custom dictated, but the Fire Lord motioned them back down. Azulon walked slowly around his part of the table and stood where the storyteller had been. Looking at the nobility seated at the tables farther down the hall, many of them members of the War College, he continued in a voice mightier than his frail frame seemed to allow.

“This shame is no secret and it belongs to us all. In the last ten years we have lost most of the lands conquered by my father and me in my youth. Our enemies have organized against us. We must take action now – or we will lose this war.” Azulon paused a moment to allow this to sink in before he continued, “We have lost our footholds on the western shores of the Inland Sea and Lake Myojin, and the Nasu Plain has fallen.”

“Worst of all, it has been many years now since General Nifong and his cavalry swept down from the Granite Mountains.” He spoke the Earth Kingdom leader’s name with bitterness, but grudging respect.
Since then this scourge of the Sun Spirit has destroyed four Fire Nation armies. Over three hundred thousand loyal Fire Nation soldiers dead or missing. The list of our defeats at his hands is long and sordid. You know them all! Names like Heifei, Sun Valley, and the Song. Among those lost at the infamous Battle of the Song was my brother, Prince Xian’s father, who passed to the spirit world that day with the help of an assassin’s blade! As if the enemy isn’t enough for us to contend with, we suffer the evils of treachery within our own ranks as well.”

At this several noblemen rose from their seats with cries of, “Lord, may you live forever!” Azulon silenced these with a wave of his hand and continued.

“One by one, our great strongholds have been sacked and destroyed. Of the five original colonies, only Mequon remains. How long will we sit idly by and allow our patrimony to be stolen by our inferiors?”

“The time has come for us to renew our commitment to victory with the blood of our enemies! In my father’s time we replaced sailing vessels with ironclads and with this power I took absolute control of the seas! Now we must do the same on land. The construction and training of our new army is nearly complete and the armored war machines that it contains will finally give us the advantage we need to overcome the Earth Kingdom’s numbers!”

Azulon paused and looked over at his brother’s son, “Prince Xian!”

Xian rose instantly from his seat, walked behind the table and knelt before his uncle.

“Yes, Lord.”

“I place you in command of the new army and all Fire Nation forces north of the Great Divide. Your orders are to avenge your noble father’s death! Invade the Nasu plain and destroy General Nifong and his cavalry by the end of the coming summer. To aid you in this enterprise, Prince Tien Shin shall be your daimyo. My son, Prince Iroh, will join you as well. Do you accept this honor?”

“I do, Lord Azulon,” Xian replied in a strong, clear voice.

“Then may the Sun Spirit grant you victory, General Xian. Destroy our enemies and your name shall live forever.”

Xian remained kneeling, his head bowed as Azulon, followed closely by his wife, turned and left the Great Hall through the exit to his apartments in the rear. The nobility and civil servants stood up in silence as the Fire Lord made his way out.

When he was gone, the room erupted in chatter as the Fire Lord’s decision was instantly praised, debated, and, albeit quietly, criticized in some quarters. Many remarked that Prince Xian was justly popular for his role in General Shu’s past victories and that his record as interim governor had demonstrated his administrative abilities, while others countered that four years of experience was little compared to General Nifong’s distinguished quarter century of triumphant re-conquest.

These thoughts of the chattering class mattered little to Prince Iroh, who stood up in anger and marched over to his cousin. Xian shifted his glance to see Tien Shin stand up and walk over to him as well.

“Congratulations, cousin! The Fire Lord has honored you with a difficult, but glorious task,” Tien Shin said in greeting. He was taller than both Xian and Iroh, his face leaner. His hair was black and from his cheeks grew the traditional Fire Nation sideburns. His eyes were pools of dark, liquid brown, and though his words were gracious, his tone was too measured and calculating to be truly
Xian bowed and replied, “He has, Tien Shin, and I hope for your full support. I will need it to succeed.”

“No, you won’t!” interjected Iroh hotly. Pointing an accusatory finger at his step brother he continued, “This imposter is neither my brother nor your cousin, Xian! He is Lady Ila’s son by her own first marriage,” then turning to Tien Shin, “which you seem determined to forget, Tien Shin! You are not my father’s son, you are a pretender to whom my father has given a title to please his wife!”

“Two titles, Iroh,” Tien Shin purred, “I am now daimyo of the Army of the Great Divide, and your superior officer. I will see that you learn respect.”

“How? Are you planning to arrest me for treason as well?” retorted the young Prince, “You’re a disgrace, Tien Shin, a disgrace who curries favor with my father by playing to his basest fears.”

Tien Shin’s grin grew slightly wider, his tone softer and more malevolent, “The Fire Lord does not agree with you, Prince. He, at least, appreciates those who watch his back for him. Isn’t it a shame that he has to rely on me and not his own sons for his protection?”

Iroh, stung badly by this insult, lunged toward his step-brother. Xian grabbed him by the shoulders to prevent him from reaching his target. Tien Shin’s icy smile did not waver, nor did his gaze lift from Iroh as he bowed slightly to Xian. Then, with a single backward glance of contempt, Tien Shin turned and left the hall.

Still fuming, Iroh turned to his cousin, “Father cannot be serious, Xian! Why did he choose him to be daimyo! I will not take orders from that simpering idiot! Tien Shin is a filthy, scheming –,” he cut himself off as Xian sighed and held up a hand in a mollifying gesture.

“Calm yourself cousin,” he said, releasing Iroh’s shoulder, “Nothing has happened that cannot be mended.”

Iroh opened his mouth to reply, but his cousin had begun leading him down the steps of the dais and now they reached the main floor of the hall where the guests still congregated. Nothing further could be said between them as a large group of noblemen, bureaucrats and members of the War College pressed around them to offer their congratulations and well wishes for a swift victory. Iroh, now convinced that the torture of this Harvest Moon feast would never end, was unable to speak to his cousin alone again for the rest of the evening.
Nikon looked out over the terrace to the garden below. The sun had just risen over the mountains, but had promptly hidden itself behind a bank of clouds. Soon it would begin to rain. Sighing inwardly, he hoped Iroh would not keep him waiting long to begin their morning training. Given Iroh’s mood recently, however, Nikon half hoped the rain would wash them out. Ever since the Harvest Moon feast his friend had grown sullen and prone to unpleasant, angry outbursts.

He turned around at the sound of footsteps expecting to see Iroh. Instead, he saw a short man with light brown eyes and wide forehead approaching. He wore an army uniform with no rank insignia, but Nikon instantly recognized him and bowed.

“Hail, Prince Xian!”

Xian smiled warmly and bowed slightly in return before replying.

“Are you Nikon Orlando?” he inquired.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Good. I’ve been looking for you,” continued the Prince. Nikon’s eyebrows disappeared under his bangs in shock. Xian chuckled at this response and jabbed a finger at him, "Yes, you!"

Nikon turned his head slightly away from Xian at this statement. Despite the Prince’s pleasant countenance and his own friendship with the Crown Prince, he knew enough to know that such sudden attention from the high and mighty often had disastrous consequences for more common folk like him. His eyes darted from side to side, but he could see no guards on the terrace. They were alone.

“Have I done something wrong, Your Highness?” he asked in a low, tense voice.

“Not at all, my friend. In fact, I’ve come to ask for your help.”

“My help?” asked Iroh’s friend incredulously, his voice kicking up an octave in surprise. This was getting truly bizarre.

Xian’s smile grew wider. He looked around the empty terrace in a slightly exaggerated fashion, then fixed his gaze once more on Nikon.

“Well, there are only two of us here and we did establish that your name is Nikon.”

Nikon blushed furiously at this humorous jab, then shook his head as if to clear it. He smiled and replied, “My apologies, Highness. I didn’t expect an interview this morning, but I’m, uh, glad to meet you. Prince Iroh has spoken of you nonstop since word of your return reached us last month. How can I serve?”
Xian walked up to the guardrail of the terrace and looked out over the garden.

“As I’m sure you know, our glorious ruler has charged me with a great task. To do this I need more than new technology. I need officers who can help me lead this army to victory. I asked Iroh to suggest some names and he came up with yours.” Xian turned and met Nikon’s eyes as he concluded.

The remains of Nikon’s blush drained away as the implication of Xian’s statement burned through his brain. That son of a bitch! he thought, bitterly. I’ll kill him!

Recovering fast, Nikon responded, “But your Highness, I have no combat experience and I’m just a commoner. I don’t think I have much to offer you.”

“You think so?” remarked Xian in surprise, “There are more important things than family background. I need people of ability and determination. Iroh tells me that you were rejected from the Fire Nation Military Academy because your father was a pauper. However, you didn’t let that stop you. After teaching yourself the basics, you persuaded Master Chen himself to help complete your skills. Now you train recruits for the army on Showa Field, is that right?”

Bowing his head slightly, Nikon replied, “Yes, your Highness. That is how I came to meet your cousin. It was just a few months after you left with General Shu, I believe.” Nikon’s mind ran furiously as he tried to think of a way to decline the “honor” the Prince was trying to bestow upon him. But how he could tell one of the most illustrious figures in the land that he had taken up firebending to impress a prostitute he’d had a crush on long ago?

To his horror, Xian put his hand on Nikon’s shoulder and continued in a fatherly tone, “He told me, in fact, that you are loyal to three things, to your friends, to the Fire Lord, and to the truth. Now that’s a wonderful thing to say about a person. I’d be delighted if he said something like that about me!”

“Oh, Iroh worships you!” Iroh’s friend gushed involuntarily.

“Does he really?” Xian remarked, genuinely pleased. He removed his hand from Nikon’s shoulder and placed it back on the guardrail, “Well, well! He’s a fine man, you know, and will be a great Fire Lord one day,” then with a trace of mirth, “ – even if he does have the temper of a pregnant rhinoceros.”

Nikon’s eyes bulged out at this comment. Although Iroh and he frequently traded friendly barbs in private, Nikon had never before heard anyone characterize the Crown Prince that way.

Xian laughed and waved his hand dismissively, “Oh, what? You think I didn’t know? Haha! Iroh is a true son of the Fire Nation, but I have high hopes that he will mellow in his old age.”

“Hehe, I’m not sure we’ll have any luck with that, your Highness.”

Smiling wryly, Xian replied, “You know him well, I see.”

“He’s my best friend.”

“Good, I’m glad. He has need of loyal friends. I ask again, will you join us?”

Ashamed, but unwilling to betray Iroh’s testimonial to his honesty, Nikon replied, “Prince, I don’t know what else Iroh has told you, but I’m not a warrior. I took up firebending for the wrong reasons, and though I enjoy what I do, I don’t really consider myself brave.” Stealing himself for a dismissal or worse, he continued, “The truth is, every day we hear more bad news from the front and we see more urns unloaded at the Naval yard. I… I don’t want to end up in one of them.”
Nikon dropped his gaze to look down at his feet. His head felt heavy, as if gravity were working
twice as hard to pull him to the ground. He had not expected the morning to go this way, and at this
rate he’d be better off going back to his father’s house and hiding in the basement. That is, if Prince
Xian didn’t have him executed for the cowardice he’d just confessed.

After a moment, Xian spoke. “Look at me.”

Nikon complied, meeting the Prince’s steady gaze. “You are brave. You just told the truth, however
ugly, to someone who might have killed you if they didn’t like the answer. There is no shame in
wanting to live, Nikon, and there is no honor or sense in wanting to die for the Fire Lord. I need
good men, men of substance, virtue and ability to even have a hope of turning this around. I can’t do
this alone. Iroh can’t do this alone. The fact is our nation is losing this war, and we are pledging our
lives, fortunes and sacred honor to the task of redeeming the blood of our fathers and brothers who
have passed before us. Will you not help?”

Nikon opened his mouth to protest again, but the words died on his lips. After a moment he replied,
“I will, your Highness.”

By late morning the clouds had blown away without even a drop of rain, leaving a gloriously sunny
day. Iroh and Nikon each stood several feet from the other near the center of the Palace’s smaller
agni kai arena. Their breathing was labored and sweat rolled down their bare chests. They had been
sparring for some time.

“You’re a son of a bitch!” spat Nikon through gritted teeth as he split apart a blast of fire from Iroh,
his hands steepled in front of him.

“Serves you right, my friend! It’s about time you did something constructive instead of…” Iroh
struggled to regain his breath, “…spending your nights whoring around the city!”

"Yeh, well, I notice I’m not alone on these nights you speak of, though I’ve never seen you get much
whoring done!"

Iroh aimed a blast of fire at Nikon’s lower body. His friend rolled gracefully out of the way and rose
to his feet very near Iroh. Nikon turned and swept Iroh’s feet out from under him with one of his
own in a very liquid maneuver. As he fell, Nikon delivered a blow to Iroh’s chest.

The Prince fell to the ground hard, but managed to dissipate some of the force of his collapse by
falling flat. Nikon stepped forward. Dark and brooding he loomed over Iroh, his eyes burning with
angry fire, his right arm extended in a firebending stance. Iroh shook his head to clear it and looked
up. The sun behind Nikon allowed the Prince to see only his silhouette. A drop of salty sweat
trickled down into Iroh’s eye and began to sting him. Both breathed heavily for a moment in the
silence.

Then Iroh laughed, a full belly laugh, though his stomach was taught and his chest muscular. He
grabbed his friends outstretched fist with both hands and used it to pull himself to his feet. The fire in
Nikon’s eyes had died away, leaving only a hollow, downcast look.

“It was a dirty trick,” The pauper’s son accused sullenly.

“Yes, wasn’t it? I knew you wouldn’t have any trouble saying “no” to me – you’ve saved my life
once already, but Xian, well, who can refuse my cousin anything? Besides, I could always have
gotten an order from my father if I had to. But, would I really have had to do that?”
Nikon looked up at Iroh and then around them at the empty stands before replying.

“No. I’ve been ashamed for too long, I guess. This is the chance to do something about it. But, I’m not a hero, Iroh. Not like you and Xian. You deserve to be great. I’m just a poor man’s son trying to stay alive.”

Iroh’s smile faded and was replaced with a frown. “If that’s what you think, then that’s all you’ll ever be! Sentiments like that reek of self pity. Put those thoughts away, my friend. You have been called for a different destiny! Accept it. Soon enough I think you’ll find that you can survive quite well without the delights of the capital.”

A knowing smile spread over Nikon’s face as he quoted his friend, saying, “Oh yes, I’ll live, but I won’t enjoy it. Besides,” he continued as his smile became smug, “I know my presence will torture Tien Shin every day we’re out there. At least that’s something.”

The pair retrieved their clothes from the ground nearby and exited the arena. The path up to the hill to the Palace was broken gravel down at this end, but turned quickly into a brick walkway further up. As they began their ascent, several figures came down to meet them. All three carried bows slung across their backs and were evidently headed to the archery range. One of these newcomers was Tien Shin.

Laughing Nikon remarked, “Oh, ho! Speak of the demon himself and he appears! How convenient. You going to let me kill him this time?”

“No,” replied the Prince, “If anyone gets to do that, it’s going to be me. Just keep quiet.”

As the two groups prepared to pass each other, Tien Shin held up a hand to stop his party. Iroh and Nikon stopped as well.

“What do you want, Tien Shin?” asked Iroh bluntly.

“Your Highness,” said Nikon with both a sneer and a slight bow in greeting.

Tien Shin’s eyes passed briefly over the pauper’s son before fixing on Iroh.

“Greetings, brother. Wasting your time again with the peasantry, I see? How sad to see the Crown Prince abase himself in such an unseemly manner. One never ceases to wonder what you see in someone of such low birth.”

Unable to resist the opening Nikon replied, “Well, I’ll ask Xi Shi after I lie with her tonight. She’s told me many times –“

Nikon cut himself off in mid retort as the blade of a beautiful blue enamel war fan was suddenly pressed against his throat. Whatever else he was, Tien Shin was fast. At the first mention of the stolen courtesan, he had drawn his weapon, unfolded it and placed it in the perfect position to cut his jugular. After a moment of silence, Tien Shin smiled and began to speak in his most calculated tone.

“I beg your pardon, have I interrupted your train of thought?” he asked in a mock conversational tone, “Hmm? I guess you weren’t saying anything important. That’s not unusual.”

Tien Shin turned with a look of intense hatred as Iroh grabbed his wrist and pushed his arm and the offending fan away from his friend. Nikon’s body relaxed and he took a step back, exhaling the breath he’d been unconsciously retaining.

“Enough, Tien Shin! Your arrogance and audacity astound even me! How dare you take a weapon
In one step Iroh stood almost nose to nose with his step brother and, pointing an accusatory figure, bellowed, “Are you so eager for a fight dear “brother”? The agni kai arena stands ready for us. Make your challenge now, or stand aside!”

Tien Shin, several inches taller than Iroh, looked down into the Crown Prince’s eyes with cool disdain. Iroh looked back, his cheeks flushed red, and his own eyes ablaze with indignation.

“We have a common enemy to fight, Prince Iroh,” lectured Tien Shin, his trademark expression of smugness returning to his face, “I suggest we focus our efforts where they belong. That is the kind of common sense that every ruler needs.”

Iroh and Nikon watched in silence as Tien Shin turned and led his party down the path past the agni kai arena.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” began Nikon, “but I hope that guy dies while we’re over there.”

“You’re not alone.”
Xian, Iroh, and Tien Shin present their plan of attack to Fire Lord Azulon and the War College of the Fire Nation.

Shadows danced around the throne room of the Fire Lord. The members of the War College not on campaign sat cross legged around the enormous world map that covered much of the floor. Numerous colored tiles on the map recorded current and proposed future positions of various military units.

Prince Xian stood at the head of the map facing the Fire Lord’s throne. Iroh stood on his right, Tien Shin on his left. Xian had spent the last hour explaining his plans in detail for the spring offensive now only a few months away. The grim figure of Fire Lord Azulon watched dully from his throne on the dais. He had spoken not a word since his terse greeting to Xian when the former had entered the chamber with his two feuding lieutenants.

“In summary, my Lords,” concluded Xian in his clear, confident voice, “we will land not at Mequon, as the enemy almost certainly expects, but more than a hundred leagues north, in the Gulf of Gela.” Xian pointed at the rim of the sparsely populated coast. There we will join the rest of the Army of the Great Divide, and invade the Nasu Plain from the northwest after crossing the Arno River. When we threaten the rich cities of the Nasu from this unexpected quarter there will be panic. Nifong will attack, he must, and when he does we will destroy him.”

A few moments of silence passed before a middle aged man with a shock of grey hair spoke, “I admire your confidence, General Xian. You do realize that landing in the gulf will put the Dune Sea between your army and Mequon, the nearest major Fire Nation base?”

“Yes, Field Marshal Jeong Jeong,” Xian replied, “As I said earlier, we have no intention of entering the Dune Sea and we’re confident Nifong won’t either. At least, he has never gone into the desert before. Since his forces will still be more mobile than ours, I believe cutting the maneuvering room will work to our general advantage. Also, at the Fire Lord’s order, Chieng Shiung herself will be joining us to set up the supply staging area in the gulf. With her assistance, I will personally ensure that the logistics are well managed.”

Jeong Jeong grunted his acceptance of the explanation, before continuing, “Your plan also relies heavily on the performance of the new armored vehicles. Can you report to us on the results of the training and field tests of these weapons so far?”

“Of course, the field tests have shown that the tank armor is strong enough to deflect almost any stone bombardment. They can take a direct hit from stones up to…”

Xian turned to Tien Shin who supplied without hesitation, “Up to almost a ton without any significant damage, Field Marshal. Further, in combat our tanks will be moving fast enough that they will be hard to hit by all except the most skilled earthbenders. Our men will be able to strike with virtual impunity. We have little to fear from Nifong with these new mobile forces.”

Jeong Jeong turned his steady gaze to Tien Shin, took his measure and questioned, “You are in
command of the mobile forces are you not?"

“I am,” replied the Prince with some pride.

“And on what evidence do you base this conclusion?”

Slightly taken aback, Tien Shin answered, “The field tests…”

“…are not sufficient evidence to justify your asinine assumption that we have nothing to fear from
the enemy,” Jeong Jeong finished sternly. “Nifong has been handing arrogant Fire Nation
commanders their heads for twenty years now and if you aren’t careful, you’ll end up just like them.
What do your brigade leaders say, hmm? Do they agree with your optimistic assessment?”

Tien Shin’s eyes narrowed dangerously as he replied, “The ones with sound judgment agree with
me, yes.”

“Commanders Ryu and Nikon do not agree,” spoke a man with short white hair several places down
from Jeong Jeong.

Tien Shin turned to face this new opponent and spoke, the trace of an edge to his voice, “As I said,
Master Chen, the leaders with sound judgment agree with my assessment. Commander Nikon, at
least,” Tien Shin’s taut features relaxed into a smile as he continued, “has been the subject of several
disciplinary actions already. It is unclear whether he will even be permitted to join us on the
campaign.”

“Oh?” replied Chen softly, “I’ve known Nikon for all his adult life and trained him in firebending.
When he applies his mind, he is neither impulsive nor rash in his judgment. A wise commander,
Prince, understands the value of different viewpoints. Perhaps you should pay more attention to the
opinions of those on whom your life may depend in battle.”

Enraged, Tien Shin retorted, “I doubt my life will depend on the opinion of an insignificant slave like
him, Master Chen, no matter who his friends are.”

Iroh drew breath to respond, but Xian turned to his cousin with a raised hand and a plea in his eyes.
Iroh exhaled without speaking, his eyes still fixed on Tien Shin. Xian turned back to his daimyo and
replied firmly, “You go too far, Tien Shin. Commander Nikon’s inability to hide his personal disdain
for certain of his colleagues does not diminish the validity of his assessment in this matter. Personally,
I see both great strengths and significant weaknesses with these machines.”

As Xian finished Iroh was finally able to add with an accusatory finger pointed at his step brother,
“Nikon is right Tien Shin, you are just too blind to see it!”

“To see what, Prince Iroh? What is the matter here?” The irritated question had come from the dais,
and all eyes turned to its occupant.

Recognizing the dangerous tone in his father’s voice, Iroh replied, “Father, it is clear that these
machines are, in fact, the mighty weapons we hoped them to be. Tien Shin does not exaggerate the
machine’s ability to withstand earthbending attacks, but equally clear are its many drawbacks.” Iroh
paused a moment to collect his thoughts. Then, at a slow and measured pace he began to count off
each reason, “They are huge, loud, and slower than our own cavalry, let alone General Nifong’s.
They consume a tremendous amount of fuel and apparently need hours of maintenance every day,
then turning back to his enemy, Iroh continued with rising heat, “It makes no sense to just keep
congratulating ourselves on how smart we are for creating these things when what we should be
focusing on is learning how best to use them!”
“Are we to understand, then, that you disagree with General Xian’s plan, Iroh?” came Tien Shin’s silky reply.

Iroh laughed at this obvious trap and replied, “Oh, very smooth, “brother”! Of course I support Xian’s plan. It calls for drawing Nifong into attacking our armor, not vice versa. That will eliminate their speed advantage and as long as the ground is relatively dry and stone free, we should achieve the victory we seek.”

“Caution,” Xian broke in, “is advisable in this situation for many reasons. Iroh and Nikon are correct in their assessment of both the strengths and the weaknesses of this new technology. Chieng Shiung is making improvements to the machines every day, however, and for that reason I’m confident that we’ll be able to overcome some of the defects in short order.”

“On the other hand, the army will consist of one part inexperienced men, and the other part demoralized men who have been beaten now by General Nifong many times. We must work toward several small, quick victories while looking for an opportunity to force the enemy to attack us on favorable ground at a time of our choosing.”

“Caution, General,” disagreed the Fire Lord in an acid tone, “is what has brought us year after year of disgraceful news from the front. Your initial plan of attack is appropriate, but what is this I am hearing from you now? Inexperience and morale as excuses for inaction? Such pronouncements stink of defeatism. Find the enemy, destroy him and both your problems will be solved! Your father won his victories with bold strokes, Xian, and that is what I look for in his son.”

Xian looked down, embarrassed at the admonishment from the Fire Lord, “Forgive me, Uncle. I will not disappoint you or the memory of my father by failing in the task you have given me. I will engage and defeat the enemy before the end of summer as you have instructed.”

A middle aged man with a cruel face and black hair who sat across from Master Chen spoke next, “We cannot afford to dither, General Xian. Tien Shin is right for more reasons than he has articulated. Technology advantages, however real, are notoriously temporary. You must use the advantage these weapons afford us to achieve a quick, decisive victory over the enemy before they find a way to neutralize it.”

Jeong Jeong, shaking his head in barely suppressed anger, replied, “Even if that is the case, General Cho, that is hardly justification for sending barely trained troops into high risk combat situations that –”

“Enough of this bickering!” thundered the Fire Lord from the dais. Jeong Jeong stilled himself instantly, his anger cooling. He looked down at the map on the floor, an impassive expression sliding down like a veil over his face.

“General Xian,” Azulon continued, “are you prepared to execute this plan?”

“I am, Lord Azulon. Do I have your approval?”

“You have my support, General,” the Fire Lord corrected severely, “I approve nothing until it is an undisputed success,” Azulon then looked from side to side, panning his gaze across the chamber before continuing, “This council is ended. Leave, all of you! I wish to speak to Prince Iroh alone.”

Iroh stood in silence, steeling himself for what he knew was coming, as the members of the War College rose and exited. Xian bowed low and withdrew, followed by Tien Shin who bowed low to the Fire Lord and slightly to Iroh before exiting.
As the echoes of the last footsteps died away, Fire Lord Azulon spoke, his voice like a razor, “Speak, Prince Iroh. You obviously have something to say.”

Iroh hesitated, momentarily flummoxed, but frustration and anger welling up within supplied the question that had been burning him for months since the Harvest Moon Feast, “Father, why did you appoint Tien Shin daimyo instead of me? He has no more combat experience than I do!”

Azulon snorted and replied in a softer tone, “So there it is, finally. If you’re so interested in the politics of my leadership decisions, you’re asking the wrong question. But, I can see why you focus on this.”

“I am not accountable to you, Prince Iroh, but I shall answer you nonetheless, because I expect you to work with Tien Shin and obey him as long as he is your superior officer. Is that clear?”

The Fire Lord’s son glowered, but replied, “It is, Father.”

“Tien Shin is daimyo because of the fear he will inspire in the officer corps. He is not the only successful state prosecutor, but he is by far the most feared. The Earth Kingdom and its allies are powerful enemies to be sure, Prince Iroh, but far more dangerous are those who plot assassination and insurrection within our own ranks. Remember the lessons of the Civil War which your grandfather Sozin and I fought!”

“I had not considered this, Father. But why do you trust him? His ambition is limitless!”

“I trust no one, Iroh. You are my eldest child and one day you will rule this nation and the world as Fire Lord. I pray you carve into your heart the bitter lessons I have learned before you take my place.”

Anger welling up within him Iroh replied, “What lessons, Father? I see only that Tien Shin has acquired tremendous power by putting honest men to death for treasons that probably never happened! Most of those he has had condemned were never our enemies! And those that were may not have been if we’d done things differently!”

“And I tell you they were!” thundered the Fire Lord as he rose out of his seat. Father and son locked eyes for a few moments in silent conflict before Iroh looked down at the floor. Azulon sat down once again and allowed a few moments of silence to pass before continuing in a softer voice.

“You have not yet learned, my son, that you are and always will be surrounded by enemies, as I have been. In the government, the War College, even your own family.”

A strange look spread over the Fire Lord’s face as he concluded, “You are correct that Tien Shin’s ambition is not to be taken lightly. However, this is your problem. My concern is that Nifong is eliminated by the end of next summer. This is your goal, as well as Tien Shin’s and Xian’s. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then you are dismissed, Prince Iroh, my son.”
The Road To War

Chapter Summary

At the dinner party Zuko wonders how much of what he is hearing is true. The Storyteller continues to tell of Xian's reaction to Prince Iroh's audience with his father.

“Ohhh! You’ve got to dismiss me for a toilet break! Please! I swear I’m about to float away here!”

Trimazu’s booming voice brought the audience back to the present with an almost audible crash. Gao, who a moment ago had delivered the Fire Lord’s final command, dropped the arm he had just used in an imperious gesture of dismissal. The audience began to titter as their host jumped up from his seat, evidently in some distress, and began to jog as fast as his portly frame would allow toward the exit.

As Trimazu gained the doorway, he turned and announced without a trace of shame, “Potty break, my friends! Let’s all refresh ourselves before we continue. I shall return presently.”

With that the merchant of Shanxi disappeared through the door. The room filled instantly with the low buzz of dozens of conversations, most of which contained various expressions of shock at their host’s latest faux pas. Several guests, including Chen Ho, rose from their seats and followed Trimazu, presumably to find the washroom. An attendant ran forward to Gao with a curule chair. The storyteller accepted the proffered seat with a smile as well as the glass of water the servant offered next.

Iroh’s expression during the first part of the tale had remained carefully controlled. His gaze fixed on the floor, the retired general had successfully avoided eye contact with his nephew and everyone else. Beneath his stoic countenance, however, his spirit was in turmoil. How strange and disturbing it was to hear one’s life recounted by another in such a public venue.

Worst of all, old wounds long since healed now bled again freely. Iroh thought the hurt of Xian’s passing had long since faded, but he was wrong. He was surprised at the sharpness of the pain that stabbed his heart as the storyteller played his cousin. Either through skill or, perhaps, direct observation, Gao had even mastered many of Xian’s mannerisms. Iroh clenched his fist tightly at the memories, fighting back tears for the umpteenth time that evening.

A surprisingly gentle touch on his right hand prompted him to open his eyes and look over at his nephew. A slight shock ran through the retired General as he suddenly realized that he had forgotten to release his grip on Zuko’s arm. More surprising still was the knowledge that his nephew had allowed him to hold on for so long. The moment now passed, the banished Prince removed his uncle’s hand.

“Uncle,” Zuko, his eyes wide, began in a low voice, “is any of this true?”

“Much of it, yes,” replied the retired general in a whisper.

Zuko felt suddenly ashamed at how little he really knew of his uncle’s past. Though young, he remembered many of the events of the siege of Ba-Sing-Se and its aftermath. He even recalled the glorious triumph Iroh celebrated on his return from the Battle of Five Forks. Zuko had been thrilled
when he was allowed to ride with his uncle in the parade. But those events now seemed distant, unreal, as if part of a play or even the story being told them tonight. The sudden realization of this disconnect with the one man who cared for him added to his feelings of shame and isolation.

“I’m sorry, uncle, this must be painful for you.” Despite his curiosity to hear the rest of the tale, Zuko took pity on his guardian, “Why don’t we just leave? We’ve had our fill.”

Iroh considered this, but rejected it quietly, “No, not only would that be rude to a host that has treated us with genuine kindness, but it would also draw too much attention. It is better to endure, enjoy a good night’s rest if we can, and leave in peace.” Then, even though he did not himself believe it, “After all, it is only a story.”

A few minutes of silence passed between them before Zuko finally yielded to his curiosity and asked, “Who was this Nikon, uncle? You’ve never spoken of him before.”

Iroh drew breath to respond, but was preempted by the return of their host. He swept through the door like an emperor, in complete command of his surroundings.

“Pardon, dear guests, but I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to know I feel at least ten pounds lighter!” Trimazu patted his enormous bulk for emphasis as he proceeded back to his seat. Chortles were heard round the room at this totally unnecessary announcement. Governor Tao shook his head slowly in an express of both disbelief and exasperation.

Chen Ho followed Trimazu through the door, remarking snidely, “Well, not to worry, there’s still plenty of you left to go around.”

Ignoring this barb the host sat down and replied, “So Chen Ho, did you enjoy using my new guest bathroom? I believe it’s larger than your whole entrance hall! Why, the glazing alone cost eight hundred gold pieces,” then leaning towards his neighbor he emphasized with glee, “eight hundred! Haha!”

Chen Ho snorted in disgust as he reclaimed his seat. With a snap of his fingers he signaled a nearby servant for a refill of his wine. Chen routinely found himself drinking heavily whenever he was required to attend one of Trimazu’s “events.” This inevitably resulted in a loud exchange of insults which some viewed as the highlight of the entertainment. Most, however, dreaded the altercations as just another impropriety they were forced to suffer. Strong drink had been flowing freely, so tonight would prove no exception.

Trimazu then continued, saying to no one in particular, “And how about that Nikon? He’s my kind of fellow. I’m partial to rogues, of course, and if I remember the stories right he was quite the ladies man.” Then with mock sincerity and an exaggerated sigh, “Ah, he reminds me of myself when I was young!”

“Oh please, Trimazu,” Chen Ho shot back acidly, “Gao gave at least some indication that this Nikon was good looking, which certainly rules out any comparison with you. Everyone knows you remain unmarried because your morbid obesity would scare a canyon crawler into fits.”

“Why Chen Ho,” their host replied with delight, “I believe you’re actually developing a wit! Perhaps your brain is finally beginning to work? Of course, it’s entirely due to my influence, you mustn’t take any credit.”

“And, as a matter of fact, I was in love once, but it didn’t work out. Different worlds, you see? Now that I’m rich, though, I get marriage proposals at least once a week. The latest was from Lau Bei Fong from down south. He wants me to marry his twelve year old daughter. Do you believe that?”
Once again adopting his conspiratorial tone Trimazu leaned over to address Iroh, “It’s positively immoral! These snobs look down at farting in public, but will gladly sell their own daughter to a man they hardly even know, half a world away – just to stop me from ruining their iron and nickel business! It’s scandalous! I have half a mind to take them up on the offer, just to rescue the poor little soul from such horrendous parents!” He nodded once quickly for emphasis before turning back to the storyteller who waited patiently.

“Gao!” he barked.

The old storyteller rose from his seat and the guests began to quiet as fast as if the lights had been dimmed in a playhouse. He bowed once to the audience then turned back to Trimazu and enquired, “Shall I continue, Master?”

The merchant lowered his wine glass after a long drink, burped, and replied, “By all means, my good man. Now that my bowels have been evacuated, I think we should continue. You had just finished telling us about Iroh’s unhappy chat with old Azulon. What a miserable old man. Glad I wasn’t there!”

“As it happens,” the storyteller began as he turned back to his audience, “that’s exactly how most members of the War College felt, and perhaps even Prince Xian…”

Xian and Iroh looked out from under the awning of the command tent. The capital’s naval base bustled with activity below them. Dozens of Fire Nation warships lined the docks and hundreds of yard workers busied themselves loading the ships with the supplies and instruments of war.

Yet to be loaded, but lined up in neat rows on the shore were the tanks that now made up the main body of the Fire Nation land forces. They were large, ugly metal contraptions whose unpainted steel reflected dully in the failing light of the early evening.

Iroh adjusted his heavy coat as a rare snowfall began to descend from the heavens. Spring was now less than a month away, but winter still held its icy grip over the Fire Nation. After observing the scene for a few moments, Xian broke the silence, “So, how did it go after the rest of us were dismissed?”

Iroh did not reply. His eyes remained fixed on the scene below.

“You’re still angry about Tien Shin,” stated Xian simply as he turned and sat down at a table loaded with tea and refreshments behind them.

Iroh turned to his cousin and suddenly shouted, “Of course I am, Xian! Why shouldn’t I be? Why aren’t you? He patronizes you as much he flaunts his contempt for me!” Beside himself, Iroh continued, “You know what he’s doing, don’t you?”

“Peace, cousin,” implored Xian, offering Iroh a steaming cup, “Sit down and have some nice, calming tea.”

“I don’t want any calming tea!” Iroh spread his hands wide in a gesture of frustration, “Don’t you understand? Step by step Tien Shin is removing everyone who’s a threat to him and paving the way for his own ambitions – and Father is helping him do it!”

Xian regarded his cousin coolly. Slowly he put the cup back down on the table. “How much of this did you say to the Fire Lord?”
His anger ebbing, the Crown Prince sat down heavily and admitted, “Pretty much all of it.”

“That may not have been wise.”

“I don’t care.” Iroh replied glumly.

“Yes, you do.” Xian contradicted confidently, “What else did he say?”

“Nothing much. Something about asking the wrong question if I was so interested in his decisions. It didn’t mean very much to me.”

Xian took his tea cup and leaned forward, cradling it in his hands for warmth. After a moment or two of silence he replied, “You’ve been upset that Tien Shin was made daimyo instead of you. Fair enough. He’s a filthy blackguard who, I’m sure, the Fire Lord has promoted into this position to discourage insurrection.”

Iroh’s eyes went wide at his cousin’s insight. “Uh, yes, that’s exactly what he said.” How could Xian know this?

“But, has the question never crossed your mind why he put me in command?”

The question was sudden and at first, quite preposterous to Iroh. He replied without thinking, “Well, of course you should be in command, cousin. There is no other suitable candidate for this honor!” replied Iroh in a shocked tone.

“Oh? What about Master Chen? Or Field Marshall Jeong Jeong? You know and respect them both. Their experience is far greater than mine.”

“I had… forgotten them.”

“Do you still not understand why Uncle has put me in command?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you not heard the whispers, cousin? They say the Fire Lord fears another rebellion if he places the power of this new technology into the hands of anyone but a member of the royal family. Worse, they say if he took command himself – and lost – it would surely ignite the civil war that all fear.” Xian took a sip of the tea he had offered Iroh and concluded, “They are right.”

“So, what of it? Father is paranoid. We know this. That doesn’t mean you are any less suitable to lead.”

“True, but it doesn’t make me any more suitable either. Uncle is taking a terrible risk, Iroh. He is trying to balance the need for strong leadership and experience against a powerful external enemy with the need for loyalty.” Xian looked down and with simple dignity uttered the truth he had known since the night of the Harvest Moon Feast, “I am not the best choice to command this army, just as Tien Shin is not the best choice to be daimyo. My concern is for our men and our nation. This campaign could yield the victory we seek, Iroh, but it could also be our end. My dreams are so dark.”

A few moments of silence passed as Iroh looked closely at his cousin. The anger that had animated him for most of the conversation evaporated instantly. Xian, whom Iroh had always known as a pillar of strength and wisdom, seemed somehow to shrink amidst the uncharacteristic expressions of doubt and foreboding on his face. He was clearly upset to have spoken so to the Crown Prince.

Trying to find words of comfort for a man he admired and loved Iroh began, “I would choose no one
else, cousin.” The Crown Prince smiled and continued, “So get used to use it. When I am Fire Lord, hopefully many, many years from now, I too will settle for no one other than you in times of trouble. Especially since I doubt I’ll be able to tear Nikon away from whatever brothel he’s currently frequenting.”

Xian looked up and rewarded his cousin with a little laugh. Then in a serious tone, “You will make an excellent Fire Lord, Iroh. I hope I live to see it.”

Iroh frowned at this, saying, “None of that, cousin! I forbid it. We will be victorious, we have no choice.” Looking down himself, Iroh continued, “I won’t give you up.”

Then the Crown Prince raised his head and locked eyes with his cousin, an impish grin on his face “Tien Shin, on the other hand, I would gladly hand over to Nifong with a thousand gold pieces and the governorship of any province he wants!”

Xian laughed as Iroh poured himself some tea. “Ah, you’ll join me for some tea after all, then?”

“Yes, on second thought, maybe some nice, calming tea would be good.”

After finishing their tea the pair caught a carriage down to Showa Field. The infantry were assembling there for inspection that afternoon and Xian insisted that he conduct these exercises personally. Xian dozed much of the trip as Iroh looked out the window.

As the carriage mounted the hill overlooking the training grounds the sound of someone grabbing the exterior cleats was heard. Nikon’s face then popped in through the window, startling both of the passengers.

“Welcome, General Xian, Prince Iroh,” Nikon inclined his head in a slight bow to each of them as he hung onto the moving carriage, “You’re going to be early. We should be ready in about twenty minutes. I just learned Chieng Shung won’t be here for another hour or two, though.”

Recovering from Nikon’s sudden appearance Xian responded, “Greetings, Commander. Why won’t Chieng be here on time?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t give a reason. We were supposed to have met her weeks ago when we first found out we were having so much trouble with the fuel filters, but she’s blown us off every time. What’s her problem?”

Xian coughed and replied, “Well, let’s just say she’s like her father.”

Iroh raised an eyebrow at this, for he had never met Chieng either. Her father’s surly behavior was just as legendary among the nobility, however, as was his inventive genius.

“Why? What was he like, General?” asked Nikon.

“He was an arrogant, nasty old man. But…,” Xian continued with a slight, knowing smile, “you may like her. Or appreciate her at any rate.”

“Oh?”

At that moment the carriage came to a sudden, lurching halt. Nikon was almost thrown, but managed to hold on. The tank commander jumped off the carriage’s sideboard as Xian and Iroh got out to investigate the source of the delay.
Their carriage was driving through the training base at the edge of the main training grounds. A dozen state barouches were parked in front of the headquarter building. A party of men had just exited. They were escorting a figure in white towards the parked carriages. As they drew nearer the identity of those at the head of the procession became clear.

A company of military police were escorting Master Chen, his hands bound in chains. He was flanked by Tien Shin on one side and by Yotaku Macro, the infamously cruel Commander of the Fire Lord’s Guard.

“What is this? Master Chen – what’s happened? Why are you with these guards and that – that…” Nikon sputtered, pointing at Tien Shin as he searched for the words to express his shock.

“Master Chen is under arrest for treason,” Tien Shin supplied.

The prisoner looked solemnly at his former student, then turned to Iroh and explained in his sonorous voice, “It seems I made some disparaging remarks at dinner a few months ago about your father. I don’t recall them.”

Shaking his head incredulously, Iroh addressed his step brother, “This is nonsense, Tien Shin! This time you’ve gone too far – you’ll be laughed out of Court for this.”

“I don’t think so, Prince Iroh. Now stand aside. I am on state business and may not be interfered with – even by the Fire Lord’s son!”

Thrusting Nikon out of the way, Tien Shin marched past Iroh and Xian with his prize. The prisoner was loaded into the closest carriage and spirited away before any of them could utter another word.
Painting the Town Red

Chapter Summary

Iroh and his friends have a close encounter outside the infamous Ten Bells tavern...

Iroh had stopped drinking long ago. So had Gan. Both looked across the rough iron table in concern at Nikon, the hoods of their black cloaks leaving their faces in shadows. The young commoner had not stopped drinking. It was now long past midnight and it had been more than an hour since Xian had given them the ominous news.

The General had met them at the seedy Ten Bells tavern where they now sat. Lying in the middle of the infamous Shinjuku section of the city, the Ten Bells and its neighboring establishments were notorious for both the routine acts of violence that played out within their walls and as houses of ill repute. Dark, dangerous and heavily overpopulated, Shinjuku was the lowest of the slums whose streets were ruled by gangs of vicious thugs. Nikon had never taken Iroh to such a place before and, looking around and breathing deep, Iroh was glad this was so.

The tavern was a single, cavernous room with high ceilings and no windows. The walls were lined with booths made of wood and tables of iron, all except the east wall which was occupied by the bar. The booth in which Iroh and his friends sat was directly opposite the bar. Two huge fire pits provided the main sources of warmth and light for the dirty establishment, though a few sorry looking brassieres burned along the wall above every other booth. The tavern was loud, packed with people, and smelled like a toilet. Everyone except the bartenders and prostitutes, however, were obviously drunk beyond caring.

Against Iroh’s advice, Nikon had dragged them out for a night on the town in a vain attempt to drown their collective sorrow at Master Chen’s arrest. Xian had volunteered to petition Azulon for Chen’s release. However, it had not gone well...

The door to the tavern banged open. Xian stood in the doorway, unrecognizable in his dark brown cloak to all but Iroh and his friends. Behind him the wind whipped a cold rain into the entryway. Their commanding officer shut the door, approached them and sat down heavily.

“He won’t have it. The Fire Lord refused to dismiss the charges.”

Iroh clenched a fist as the anger against his father and Tien Shin welled up within him.

“But why?” asked Nikon, grabbing the edges of the table, his whole body tensing in visible frustration.

“Tien Shin has him convinced Master Chen was plotting rebellion along with conspirators unknown.”

Iroh squeezed his eyes shut at the pronunciation. It meant death.

“Based on what evidence?” asked Gan softly.

“Is any required, Gan?” retorted Nikon in anger.
“No names!” hissed Iroh, his eyes darting around the crowded tavern to see if anyone had overhead. Gan was the second son of General Shu and occupied an important post in the Ministry of War. Addressing him by his name – or certainly that of the Crown Prince or his cousin would instantly turn the situation into an uncontrollable circus. Admonished by his friend, Nikon looked down sullenly at the half empty glass of liquor in front of him. He finished the drink in one swift motion, hardly noticing the burning liquid coarse down his throat.

Xian looked around quickly as well before addressing Iroh, “And that’s another thing. This was a stupid idea. It’s your business what you did with your friends before you were assigned to me. But if we’re exposed here the scandal would destroy our reputations. Besides, these streets are crawling with thugs who delight in terrorizing the streets.”

Almost on cue, the room came to a standstill as a fight broke out at the bar. A thin young woman with garish makeup and revealing dress had just broken a glass pitcher over the head of a huge, heavy set man wearing a hooded cloak. She screamed as the heavy set man grabbed her by the hair and slapped her to the ground. A man in leather armor tried to intervene, but the heavy set man picked him up and casually threw him over the bar.

The woman’s antagonist then moved toward her once again. He was stopped by the tallest of his equally hooded comrades. The tall man whispered something in the heavy set man’s ear as several large bouncers approached, their fists aflame. The hooded figures left the tavern, followed closely by the bouncers who accused them loudly of being gangland scum. It was the fourth such altercation, and probably the least violent, that Iroh and his friends had seen in the short time they’d been there.

As the fascination around the latest spectacle dissipated, Iroh began, “I should have spoken to Father, cousin. Maybe I could have done something.”

“Be thankful you didn’t. Not only would you have been no more successful, but you’d have set yourself up as an object of fear and suspicion in the eyes of the Fire Lord, as I have.”

The Crown Prince refocused on his cousin with a sudden start. Gan, shaking his head slowly, swore under his breath. The heat and noise of the room suddenly receded in Iroh’s perception as Xian’s last three words echoed in his mind.

“What do you mean?” he asked softly.

The general turned his hooded head slightly from side to side once again. Leaning forward and dropping his voice even lower he replied, “It was as I feared. He knew, right from the start, that I was there to ask for Chen’s release. He questioned my loyalty and hinted that I might even have been involved. I escaped death only by offering him my own sword to cut off my head. He declined, but after enough hesitation for me to know that I had rolled the dice – and lost.”

The group fell silent as each weighed the import of this unhappy news. The raucous sounds and rank smells of the tavern, which had receded when Xian was speaking, now rushed in upon Iroh’s senses.

The Crown Prince surveyed the room as Xian reached over, stole his cup and drank a mouthful.

“What was that how it ended?” asked Gan suddenly, breaking the group’s sullen reverie.

“Yes. He dismissed me with a warning to put my effort where it belonged.”

“Do you suppose there was a conspiracy?”

Iroh snorted and replied, “Maybe, but Master Chen? He is a man of iron loyalty. Grandfather trusted him with his life. The whole idea is stupid.”
Addressing Gan’s original question Xian replied, “I can’t get any answers. Several other arrests were made,” then with a glance over at Nikon, who continued to look down at his drink in silence, “including several of Chen’s current students.”

“I don’t understand,” Iroh whispered in an intense voice, “Tien Shin can’t just bury men of honor with a pretty tale.”

“Why do you doubt the evidence of your eyes, cousin? Tien Shin has buried many men with his pretty tales, as you yourself have seen. Would you be all that surprised to hear after a few weeks that he killed himself after signing a confession? We’ve heard that before, and how many times?”

Nikon looked up at this and met Xian’s eyes from underneath his hood.

“They’re as good as dead, aren’t they?” he asked in a husky whisper, his expression hollow.

Avoiding the question Xian replied, “We’ve one card left to play. If the weather breaks, I will move up the date for The Crossing. If he lives long enough Master Chen will still be prosecuted, but not by Tien Shin. I fear it may not alter the outcome, but it’s all I can do. Now, I must leave this place, and I urge you three to do the same. Staying here in this squalor and depravity is surely proof of madness.”

Without another word Xian finished Iroh’s drink and left.

The next several hours had been spent rehashing the facts, debating various courses of action, and watching Nikon sorely test his legendary tolerance for alcohol. Iroh vacillated between anger at Tien Shin and his father and worry for Xian and his friend. Nikon for his part had sunk into an uncharacteristic brood. His face, normally graced with a smile, was now occupied by a vacant look and a drawn countenance. He barely participated in the conversation after Xian left. Gan, true to form, quietly and methodically tried to analyze the situation and produce alternatives. Though the effort was praiseworthy, no palatable option materialized.

Events were proceeding too fast for Iroh and he reproached himself bitterly for not taking some decisive action to resolve the situation. Even as he savaged himself he knew there was little he could do. Regardless of the facts, Master Chen was now officially a traitor. Iroh did not believe Azulon truly suspected Xian of rebellion, but he was clearly angry with his cousin. Nikon, as a former student of a public enemy; that was different. How long could Iroh protect him? He made a silent prayer that Xian delivered on his promise to advance the date for the invasion. At this moment, the front lines might be the safest place for both his friend and his cousin.

Soon another fight erupted that involved almost twenty people, broke half a dozen tables and set several patrons on fire. The proprietors proceeded to throw everyone out with loud cursing and threats. Iroh and Gan were both relieved as they had tried and failed several times in the last hour to get Nikon to leave.

As they exited the tavern, their hoods still covering their faces, a woman’s scream was heard nearby as well as the sound of a fight. Behind the tavern what seemed a few streets over a plume of flame went up. Iroh and Nikon looked at each for a split second before Nikon ran in the direction of the scream. Iroh and Gan followed, both cursing loudly. The tavern regulars exiting the establishment ran away from the sound of the disturbance as fast as their various states of inebriation allowed. It was well known that the gangs not only killed for money and plunder, but also tortured for pleasure.
The Crown Prince fought down terror as he ran behind his friend. Consciously forcing himself to relax, he began to regulate his breathing in preparation for the fight he felt was coming. As his gait settled into a sustainable rhythm, the words of Master Chen echoed in his mind, “When he applies his mind, he is neither impulsive nor rash in his judgment.” Sadly, Iroh was certain that his friend had applied very little of his mind in his decision to rush into whatever situation lay ahead of them. Though he had drunk heavily, Nikon’s stride betrayed no undue influence, only his judgment did.

As they entered the area Nikon thought the sound and flame had come from, they realized the sound must have bounced strangely off the surrounding structures and that they had overshot. Nikon stopped for a moment, just long enough for his friends to catch up, then cut through an alley on their left back towards the tavern. The sounds of the fight grew loud as they turned right into an adjacent alley.

As they ran down the narrow passageway Nikon was almost knocked over by two women, their clothing torn, running past them in the opposite direction. At the end of the alley they saw four hooded figures fighting with several other men. As the combatants launched blasts of fire at each other, the ground was briefly illuminated to reveal a slight, crumpled figure on the ground nearby. Another man getting up off the ground was obviously wounded. He struggled to his feet and ran up the alley a short distance to the nearest street and disappeared. The hooded figures, one of whom was obviously the heavy set man from earlier in the evening, were clearly dominating this fight.

Nikon stopped, requiring a moment to take in the scene. Iroh, his mind unencumbered, assumed the worst and engaged the nearest hooded assailant, the tallest, without hesitation. Iroh could feel his senses sharpen as he tuned out the noise and focused completely on his breathing, his body, and his opponent. The tall man was advancing quickly on a smaller man who, though brandishing a sword, was falling back in fear. The tall man raised his arms, bathed in fire, in preparation to strike.

The blast never came as Iroh, in a single fluid motion, grabbed the tall man’s left arm at the wrist, twisted it around to his back and swept his feet out from under him. Surprised, the tall man fell on his back. Iroh brought his foot down to stamp on the tall man’s stomach, but his opponent rolled out of the way. Summoning a ball of fire Iroh hit the tall man square in the chest as he got to his feet. Iroh’s opponent slammed into the brick wall of the alley with a distinct clang.

Steel armor, Iroh thought, not only a coward, but a rich one.

As Iroh advanced, he saw out of the corner of his eye one of the defenders receive a sword through his belly from the heavy set man. Nikon then rushed past him, kicked the sword out of the murderer’s hand, and tackled him to the ground.

Sidestepping lightly Iroh launched a blow with his fist that erupted in a plume of fire. The blast and his fist were blocked by the tall man who responded with a blast of his own. The Crown Prince spun around and crouched low, allowing the blast to pass over him. Behind him a pile of refuse instantly caught fire and filled the alley with heat and dull, reddish orange light.

The respite lasted but a moment as his opponent launched several follow up blasts in quick succession. Iroh jumped backwards and aimed a gout of fire at a sewer manhole located on the ground between them. His blast popped the cover out of its hole, causing it to somersault through the air towards the tall man. It was not fast enough to hit Iroh’s opponent, however, who simply stepped out of its way.

As Iroh and his opponent took momentary stock of each other in the hellish light of the burning trash, the tall man reached into his waistband behind his back and produced a pair of war fans. Iroh focused on them in horror. Though it was difficult to be certain even a few feet away, the fans were metal with a dark enamel coating. The tall man was knocked to the ground as the heavy set man
collided with him, propelled backwards by a joint blast of fire from Nikon and Gan. The remaining
defenders and Gan had forced the other assailants to the ground where they lay groaning.

Iroh’s shock was compounded when the heavy set man and the tall man regained their feet. The
heavy set man’s hood had fallen. So had Nikon’s. They all stared at each other. The heavy set man,
even as shadows danced across his cruel face, was instantly recognizable.

“Macro!” choked one of the defenders. All but one of the men who had been with the women then
fled, gasping in terror as if a very demon from hell had appeared before them. This was in fact the
case. The heavy set man was indeed none other than Yotaku Macro.

Which meant…

The tall man suddenly put his war fans away and grabbed Macro’s arm as the sound of tracked
vehicles approaching was heard. Macro turned and led the tall man and their two barely recovered
companions down the alley.

Still in shock, Iroh ran over to the crumpled body. Beside her was the small man with the sword,
which now lay flat and useless beside the woman’s body. The man sobbed uncontrollably. Gan knelt
down next to her and grimaced. The alley was damp with the rain from earlier in the evening, but he
recognized the sticky wetness of blood as it soaked his garments. He felt for a pulse.

“She’s dead,” he said dully, “Look’s like her throat, and… some other things have been cut.”

Looking up the small man spoke thickly to the heavens, “I…loved her! I loved her… and he just…
he just…killed my poor Xia!”

The man slumped over the girl’s body, her heavily painted face and filthy, torn clothing visible in the
flickering light. She was obviously the same prostitute from earlier that evening, the man either her
john or her pimp.

Gan stood up and asked in a subdued voice, “So, do we feel worse? Or better?”

Iroh thought about this for only a second before opening a door into a nearby building, “No time for
that now, we’ve got to get the hell out of here.”

The three men fled into the night.
Goodbye To All That

Chapter Summary

The night before the army departs for the Earth Kingdom, Iroh and his friends finally meet the architect of the Fire Nation war machines - and she isn't very happy about it.

The weather broke less than two weeks later. Gone were the cold, rainy skies and tempestuous seas that made ocean travel so dangerous in winter. True to his word, Xian had instantly moved up the date of the invasion.

The pace of loading had increased dramatically and the activity around the harbor had reached a fevered crescendo before all suddenly became still. Earlier that day the Fire Lord had seen them off in a grand ceremony on the steps of the Palace. Accompanied by his second wife, Azulon had bid them farewell with a stony countenance.

Xian, clad in his ceremonial steel, had mounted the white marble staircase on the east side of the palace to kneel before his Uncle. Tien Shin had climbed with him. The staircase and the streets leading up to them were lined with thousands of people, many of whom were wishing fathers, brothers, mothers and sisters goodbye.

The Fire Lord had spoken a few words to his nephew that were unintelligible to any bystander. He had then handed Xian a scroll, the token of his office and the symbol of his authority from the Fire Lord. The crowd cheered as the young General had stood, his daimyo following suit. Lady Ila had then stepped forward and handed her son a letter which he had taken and inserted into a fold of his long red cloak.

Iroh had watched all of this from far below where he stood at the head of the procession. Even though it had happened only a few hours ago, it still seemed but a dream.

Putting aside thoughts of this uncomfortable farewell, Iroh and Nikon now sat on a pair of stools on the observation deck outside the bridge of the great battleship Sulaco. It was twilight and the fleet was to sail on the morning tide. Proud towers of iron and steel, the mighty ships of the Fire Nation lined the docks in deceptively quiet anticipation of the violence and death that lay ahead. Below decks, the crew and soldiers of the Army were finishing their evening meal.

Squinting, Iroh brought the book he was reading closer to his face, trying to read a few more pages before the gathering night made it impossible. A cool breeze threatened to flip the pages, but Iroh restrained them.

“You’ll go blind reading in this light,” a familiar voice sounded from behind the book.

Nikon stood and saluted sharply, a smile on his face, “That’s what I tried to tell him, sir.”

Iroh dropped his book to see his cousin, who motioned them to stand at ease.

“Enough of that, my friend, while we’re alone at least. We’ve had enough pomp for today,” then to his cousin with a wry grin, “Oh? Iroh with a book? A rare site indeed. What wondrous tome has the power to hold your attention, I wonder?”
“I nearly choked when he showed me,” laughed Nikon.

Iroh held up the cover so that his cousin could read the title. “Lost Civilizations of the Ancient Earth Kingdom,” read Xian, his eyebrows rising in surprise, “Wondrous indeed!”

“Yes. I tried to find something on recent Earth Kingdom history, but there was very little. We don’t know much about our opponents, do we?”

“Not as much as we’d like, no. But then, have you learned anything of value from this?” he inquired with mock severity.

Iroh turned towards his cousin and replied, “I’m not sure how valuable, but certainly some things of interest. Whether or not I believe any of it is an entirely different matter. I know the monorails are real – you’ve seen them. But ships that fly through the air? Buildings so tall they touch the sky?”

“It seems fantastic, doesn’t it?” Xian replied as he walked over to the railing. Two figures, a man and a woman, had just boarded the ship on the weather deck below. They were saluted by the watch guards and escorted over to the main hatch. Xian turned back to his friends as the newcomers entered the superstructure below and continued, “But, I have seen some strange things in the Earth Kingdom during my travels, and I have heard many tales.”

“I don’t believe any of it,” Nikon stated flatly. “If they were so far ahead back then, why aren’t they invading us instead of the other way around?”

Iroh considered this briefly. The question troubled him. Though fantastic, he knew there was little doubt among Fire Nation scholars that the glorious achievements of these ancient Earth Kingdom states were matters of historical fact rather than fantasy. But now, they were long since gone, the stuff of legend even by the time of Chin the Conqueror. If their technology and advanced civilizations could not protect them from ultimate dissolution, what would the future bring for the Fire Nation?

“I’m not sure,” replied the Crown Prince, his brow furrowing in worry. “Perhaps, as this author suggests, it was plague, or natural disasters, civil wars, or some combination. These civilizations existed long ago, perhaps even before the first Avatar. The world must have been very different back then,” remarked Iroh thoughtfully.

Shaking his head Nikon replied, “I still don’t buy it. Look, nothing of value has been invented in the Earth Kingdom for heaven knows how long. Those people live the way their ancestors have for hundreds or even thousands of years. If what these books say is true, then in a few centuries the Fire Nation might end up back in the Dark Ages like the Earth Kingdom. I just don’t believe it.”

“You mean you don’t want to believe it,” corrected Iroh gently. “I don’t want to either. However, that doesn’t mean it’s impossible. The real question is why did those civilizations collapse? And, more importantly, how can we prevent the same from happening to us?”

Iroh stood, dropped the book on his stool and stretched as Xian replied, “Well, how did you two suddenly become philosophers? Those are good questions, cousin, but the answers will have to wait.”

Iroh and Nikon focused on their commanding officer as they heard the sounds of people entering the bridge behind them. A smile spread across Xian’s face as he glanced behind him to confirm what his ears had detected.

Turning back to his friends he said, “Ah! And now I have surprise for you both.”
“Oh?” questioned Iroh.

“Yes. Two, actually.”

Several people mounted the ladder from below and entered the wheel room. Two, obviously guards, stayed behind while the other two exited onto the observation deck.

The taller of the two newcomers was Gan, dressed in the dark grey uniform of the Ministry of War. In his left hand he carried a tablet and stylus which he held out before him as if they were the source of some dread disease. As he caught sight of his friends, he shook his head in resignation. Xian’s smile spread into a satisfied grin.

Iroh was delighted to see his friend so unexpectedly, but he couldn’t help but focus on Gan’s companion. Several inches shorter, she was probably a few years his and Nikon’s senior. She had long black hair that she wore in a long ponytail and a pleasant figure which was utterly ruined by the expression of extreme displeasure that marred what otherwise would have been an attractive face.

Gan and the woman stopped in front of Iroh and Xian. Nikon instantly appeared on Xian’s other side, placing himself in front of the unhappy woman. She ignored Nikon, keeping her sharp golden eyes fixed on Xian, as if her gaze might itself cause his instantaneous death.

“Gan! How wonderful to see you,” Xian remarked with a mischievous grin.

“Your Highnesses,” returned Gan with a stiff bow.

“But, Gan, why are you here?” asked Iroh incredulously.

Nikon tore his eyes away from the sour woman long enough to remark, “Yeh, it’s not that we’re unhappy to see you, but shouldn’t you be doing some accounting or something back at the Ministry?”

“You’re damn right I should,” Gan shot back, looking with wide eyes at Xian. “But, I received this three hours ago.”

Gan tore a black tube out of his uniform and handed it to Nikon. The seal was unmistakable. Fire Lord Azulon’s missives were instantly recognizable in their ominous black cases.

Nikon began to open the tube, but Gan cut him off, “Oh, don’t bother. It’s really from Xian. I’m to be the Qu’ai Tau for the Army of the Great Divide and there isn’t a thing I can do about it,” turning to Xian to complete the thought, “is there?”

Xian placed his hand gently on Gan’s shoulder and replied, “Not a thing, my friend.”

“Qu’ai Tau? The finance officer? Isn’t that a demotion, Gan?” remarked Nikon with a brazen laugh.

“Nonsense, Nikon, now don’t bait him!” admonished Xian with a severe look at the young brigade leader.

Before Gan could himself reply to Nikon’s remark, Iroh stepped forward and hugged his friend, who stiffened momentarily before hugging him back, “I’m so glad you’re coming.”

“I’m not, but, if I have to go get myself killed, at least I’ll have decent company,” then, with a nasty look at Nikon he added, “mostly decent, anyway.”

“Speak for yourself, Gan,” spoke the woman in an acid tone as she crossed her arms across her
Gan disengaged from the Crown Prince and snorted, “Speak for you? Not if you paid me.”

Iroh’s eyes went wide. No one loved money as much as Gan. Normally such a comment would have excited laughter, but it was clear that this time he meant every word. The Crown Prince’s eyes flicked back to the nameless woman before him.

After Nikon cleared his throat in an obvious signal, Xian supplied, “Oh, of course, Prince Iroh, son of Fire Lord Azulon and heir to the throne of the Fire Nation, this is Chieng Shiung, daughter of Liu Shiung.”

“Your Highness,” she intoned coldly.

So this is Chieng? No wonder she has a reputation, thought Iroh as she bowed ever so slightly before him.

“And this is Nikon Orlando, Commander of the 5th Armored Brigade,” Xian motioned to Nikon, who bowed. “Nikon, this is Chieng Shiung, Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces.”

“Formerly Commander of Strategic Rocket Forces,” Chieng corrected, “Instead of developing the weaponry to end this war permanently I am being wasted on this, this babysitting expedition.” She spat out the words as if she were expelling a poisonous liquid. “This is an outrage, General Xian.”

“Not true,” corrected Xian with a raised finger, “we will be using new technology in combat for the first time, technology developed by you. Adjustments will have to made – and fast. The success of this campaign –”

“I’ve heard it all before your Highness,” she retorted sharply, cutting Xian off, “and frankly it’s a crock of shit,” she jabbed a finger at her commanding officer for emphasis, “You’re robbing me of three whole sections of my technicians for this joyride. You don’t need me.”

Nikon held his chin in his hand and with an appraising look at her remarked, “I can think of a lot of reasons why we need you.”

Iroh winced at the comment and both Xian and Gan looked uncomfortable.

Chieng turned, acknowledging Nikon for the first time. Looking back at Xian, incredulous, she said, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” then back to Nikon. “Get this through your head right now. I have absolutely no interest in you. I’m not a hooker, so I don’t see why you, given your reputation should have any interest in me either. Oh yes, I’ve heard of you. Everyone’s heard of you. If you’ve got an ounce of intelligence you’ll just ride your goddamn tank and let them win your battles for you. Moron.”

Iroh’s mouth hung open at this crushing retort. He felt as if he were an inch tall, and Chieng’s withering insult had not even been directed at him.

The Crown Prince’s shock was compounded when Nikon merely laughed and replied, addressing Xian, “Well, your Highness, what a shame her manners don’t match her looks.”

“Clever,” she commented with derision, then, turning to Iroh, “this guy isn’t going to be with us the whole campaign is he, Your Highness? Please tell me he’s been selected to lead the direct frontal assault on Ba-Sing-Se or something.”

“No, Chieng, I’m afraid you and he will have to work closely together since he is one of our best
tank commanders,” replied Iroh.

“That is possibly the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. Anyway, I’d have thought you would want to have the glory role. Why aren’t you riding one of my tanks, Prince Iroh?”

The question was sudden and represented a shift in Chieng’s demeanor. Her tone made clear she was still sharp enough make you bleed if she decided to cut you, but the rancor was replaced by intense curiosity.

“General Xian placed me in charge of the infantry. Like you Chieng, I do as my orders instruct. I am pleased to hear you so confident in your creations, however. Much rides on their success.”

“More than this fool’s life, to be sure,” she said without even glancing at her target. “And why, indeed, should I not be confident? With my tanks we will be able to destroy the enemy with ease, at least on open ground. No intelligence or training required.”

“Oh, and what about the speed?” questioned Nikon, clearly savoring the opportunity to act as prosecutor. “We got over the fuel filter disaster and the sun gear thing, but even with the larger engines these machines are half the speed of our Mongoose Dragon cavalry.”

At this she turned to Nikon and replied smoothly, “I’ve solved that. During The Crossing we will strip off the belly armor. That will reduce the weight of each by almost forty stone. The field tests proved that even at the slower speed all but the strongest earthbenders will not be able to target our tanks. It’s a done deal.”

“Ha! You sound like our beloved daimyo.”

“He, at least, has a brain. Where is he, by the way?”

“He is in command of the Hiryu,” replied Iroh, pointing at an identical ship several vessels over. “You’re free to join him for the voyage, if you like,” the Crown Prince supplied hopefully.

“No,” she replied, “Since I have been forced into this ridiculous position, I insist on doing the job properly. General Xian and I have to reorganize the operation planning. I have more than a dozen tank trains that we will use for strategic re-supply of our armored columns. But this means we have to change our existing plans.”

Iroh’s shoulders slumped at this disappointing response.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence Gan picked up the book Iroh had deposited on the stool and examined it.

“So, you’ve actually been reading this. I never thought you’d open it. Did you get to the bit about the air ships and the underground dams yet?”

“Yes, we were just talking about it when you arrived. Thanks for lending it to me,” replied Iroh.

Chieng leaned over to read the title, “Why are you wasting the Crown Prince’s time with that trash, Gan? He’d be much better off reading Sun Tzu or The Strategikon of Morykos or something.”

“I’ve read those many times,” Iroh replied cautiously, trying to hide his reaction to Chieng’s assumption that he’d never even been introduced to such basic texts, “and there is little further for me to gain there without direct experience. I asked Gan for work on recent Earth Kingdom history, really hoping to learn something about General Nifong. Unfortunately, there was no direct information about him. I am afraid our enemy remains mostly a mystery.”
Chieng arched an eyebrow and commented, “Well, Your Highness, at least you do your homework. Good.”

She then turned and without even asking for leave exited the observation deck.

As soon as she was out of earshot Nikon began to chuckle hysterically, “Man, what a bitch!”

Iroh was forced to agree, “Yes, she is most unpleasant. Does she always behave this way, cousin?”

“I’ve never known her to be otherwise. She got it all from her father. He was exactly the same. We met him long ago, Iroh, but you’re probably too young to remember. We’ll have to deal with her as is, gentlemen. We will need her before this is over and we don’t have time to teach her how to behave like a human being.” Then, with a smile at Nikon, “But then, I could say the same about Nikon here.”

“Oh, I never want to behave like a human being,” Nikon replied with a grin.

“I don’t think you’re in any danger of that, my friend,” inserted Iroh before Nikon could continue, “Besides, all those times she blew us off, and we were so mad. Now, we know what a blessing it was!”

“Yes, but now we have to put up with her from now until… forever,” replied Gan with a groan, “I can’t believe I gave up spending my time relaxing in my stone garden or reading by the pond for this.”

“Yeh, well say goodbye to all that, my friend,” Nikon supplied in good humor, “Time to help us welcome the armies of the Earth Kingdom to the lower regions!”

Xian held up a hand and said, “All right, gentlemen. That’s enough self congratulation for tonight. We should all be turning in. We sail on the morning tide.”

He was right. The moon had now risen and the sounds of the evening meal from below had long since died off. Iroh, Gan and Nikon saluted their superior and went in search of their cabins. Xian, alone, stayed on deck and watched the stars in silence.
The General

Chapter Summary

The Nasu Campaign begins in earnest, and Iroh and Xian's Earth Kingdom adversary is revealed.

Based partly Msgr. James H. O'Neill's Prayer for General George C. Patton

“The Fire Nation fleet set sail that next morning,” Gao concluded in his charming baritone, “I would tell you more of that journey, esteemed guests, but very little of interest happened. After several weeks at sea, Xian’s army disembarked as planned in the Gulf of Gela.”

Iroh was snapped rudely out of his shared memory of that night by a spray of liquid from his left. The retired general lurched to avoid the spray, startling his nephew who stood up to prevent his uncle’s ponderous frame from slamming into him.

The source of the explosion was obvious. Trimazu had spit an entire mouthful of wine onto the table and floor in front of him.

“What!? WHAT!?!” the merchant thundered in fury at the old storyteller.

Gao turned in dismay, his eyes betraying more than a little fear, “I beg pardon, Master. How have I offended?”

“What do you mean, “how have I offended”? Are you out of your mind? You’re going to tell me with a set up like that nothing happened? Nothing?”

Gao was flabbergasted, as were most of the guests. Some of the party goers, however, tittered at the merchant’s outburst, though whether it was because they understood his complaint or were merely responding to his usual over the top delivery was unclear.

“Set up?” repeated the storyteller as if he’d never before heard the words strung together in such a way.

“Yes, a set up! That Chieng sounds hot. You just know she’s one of those sassy, sexy, devilishly smart types who delights in playing hard-to-get! Just like those Genji stories. And now you’re going to tell me that she doesn’t end up with one of these guys?” His voice increased in intensity as he spoke. Then, pinching his nose he continued, “Please, don’t offend my nostrils with such a heaping pile of dung!”

Releasing his nostrils Trimazu continued hopefully, “Come on, she ends up with Iroh, doesn’t she? Confess!”

His ears and cheeks burning, Iroh raised his wine glass and drank heavily. Over the rim of his goblet, Iroh eyed his nephew, who returned the look with some surprise. Air accompanied the wine down the retired general’s wind pipe and he erupted in a coughing fit, breaking eye contact with the young Prince.
“Uh, no, Master, she doesn’t end up with Iroh,” Gao replied.

“Okay, she ends up with that rake Nikon then, right?”

“No.”

“The noble Xian?” the fat merchant wheedled eagerly.

“No.”

“So she ends up with Tien Shin, then?” Trimazu concluded in horror, “How vile!”

“Uh, forgive me, Master, but, no, she doesn’t “end up” with anyone,” replied Gao, “at least not in this story.”

“Yeh, okay, fine,” the merchant replied in frustration, “maybe she doesn’t get married or whatever, but we’re going to get some hot sex, right?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” the merchant questioned in a scandalized voice.

“Yes.”

“What!” the Merchant bellowed, “You mean no sex at all? What kind of a crappy story is this? What the hell am I paying you for?”

At this Trimazu picked up a guava fruit from one of the many plates in front of him and lobbed it at the old storyteller, who dodged the fruit with some difficulty.

“Crappy?” Iroh muttered, his eyes wide in dismay at the statement.

“You’ll have to forgive him, Master Storyteller,” Chen Ho inserted in a slightly slurred voice, “your story was the closest thing Trimazu was ever going to get to actually experiencing sex with a woman.”

Few heard this brazen remark, but Trimazu turned to his neighbor, laughed and replied in a normal voice, “At least since your wife died, my dear Chen, but this is neither the time nor the place for me to relate my enthusiastic efforts to alleviate that poor woman’s acute suffering!” Trimazu turned back to the Storyteller who stood in fear before him and barked so that the entire hall could hear him, “Gao! What is this crap? I demand an explanation!”

“I apologize for offending, Master,” Gao begged, bowing low, “Had I known the requirement was for romance, I assure you I have many tales of the wild at heart whose passions overcome all reason. Do you wish me to stop, Master, and begin another tale more to your liking?”

Trimazu’s face contorted with a sour look and with a gesture of frustration replied, “Oh, I don’t know. I’ll let our honored guests decide.” Turning to Iroh he inquired, “What do you say, Xian? Do you want to hear more? Or should we ask for a Genji story?”

A veil of silence descended suddenly upon the audience and all eyes turned to Iroh. He and his nephew had been an object of curiosity among the guests when they had first entered the room, but the fascination had quickly died away. Parading around a couple of day laborers in the middle of a high feast for the nobility was probably neither the first nor the most outrageous stunt the merchant of Shanxi had perpetrated in his time. Iroh was keenly aware of the attention focused upon him.
Although most of the faces were smiling, the sensation was most unpleasant and not out of any sense of modesty or embarrassment.

Trying to put the odd sense of mingled fear and shame out of his mind, Iroh’s eyes panned around the room. Several audience members cried out for the story to continue. A few others yawned.

Then, to his surprise Iroh found himself replying, “Uh… no, Lord. I’d like to hear more,” turning to the storyteller he continued, “Our noble storyteller seems… very well informed. I wonder if he might know something of General Nifong? Is he not the ill fated hero of our story?”

The audience members who had cried out for the story to continue clapped loudly at this response. Trimazu’s sour look disappeared instantly. The merchant slapped himself on the forehead and cried, “Of course! An excellent idea! It’s not as good as some steamy sex, but it will do! Gao, tell us what you know of old Deng the Hammer, for how can we have Xian without Deng Nifong? The very idea is monstrous.”

At this Governor Tao leaned over, smiled and raised his fist in hearty agreement with Iroh, saying, “Excellent choice, Xian! General Nifong is a great Earth Kingdom hero worthy of celebration. I was too young to serve with him, but my brothers did. O that we had such leadership now!”

The old storyteller breathed a sigh of relief and replied to Iroh, “An excellent suggestion, my humble friend, and you make it at exactly the right moment,” then in a conversational tone, “Tell me, you seem of Governor Tao’s age, is General Nifong your hero too?”

Zuko folded his arms over his chest and surveyed his uncle, restraining the urge to snort derisively. Iroh looked down for a moment before replying, “He always had my respect.”

The retired general looked briefly to his left to find the Merchant of Shanxi regarding him steadily, a slight smile on his face.

“I shall he continue, Lord?” Iroh inquired.

Trimazu regarded him a moment longer, made brief eye contact with the young Prince to his right, before replying with a wider smile, “But of course, my lowly friend!” Then in a much louder voice and addressing the wider audience he continued, “I’m paying him a fortune, haven’t I said that yet?” Snapping his fingers he bellowed, “Gao, get on with it now!”

The old storyteller bowed, turned to the audience and resumed his tale. With a solemn expression he began, “Lake Myojin was Deng Zev Nifong’s greatest victory – and his last…”

The man in green armor stood at the edge of the scrub desert, his back towards the richness of the Nasu plain. Before him on the horizon lay the vast expanse of the Dune Sea. The sun had long since set and the sky was illuminated by myriads of stars. A cold wind blew off the desert floor, ruffling the man’s uniform. Crickets chirped loudly in the underbrush as the bushes sighed in the wind above them.

Approaching footsteps alerted the man to the presence of a newcomer. He knew the identity of the intruder by the rhythm of his footsteps.

“Yes, Captain?” he inquired without turning.

“Are you all right, General? You’ve been out here for awhile and we were beginning to get worried.”
General Nifong, for of course that is who he was, continuing to contemplate the desert in the distance, replied, “Your pardon, Captain. I’m fine. I’ve just forgotten how cold it gets in the desert at night.”

The younger soldier shuddered slightly and tugged his cloak more closely about him and replied, “Very cold, sir.”

The wind continued to whip by for a few moments before the General continued, “I saw several riders. Have our…guests arrived?”

“Yes, sir. A new Fire Nation army has landed in the Gulf of Gela under the command of Prince Xian.”

The aide hesitated, then closed his mouth.

“And?” prompted the General at the pause.

“Well, the reports are confused, sir. Three messengers arrived at the same time. The earliest report is already four days old. The latest is from this morning. Apparently the Fire Nation army has already disembarked, joined up with the Army of the Great Divide from Mequon and forded the Arno.”

Deng exhaled and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we had been expecting them to arrive much further south, so…”

“Yes, I know. Who’s first and how soon, then?”

“This is where it gets confusing, sir. General Jin’s infantry held them at the Arno for a day or so, but the Fire Nation troops broke through near Sedan. They’ve moved with incredible speed. Most of Jin’s men were surrounded and overwhelmed within hours.” The Captain produced several pieces of paper and began to scan through them, his brow creased in concentration, “After the breakthrough, the enemy divided into several columns.” He handed the papers over to his commanding officer and continued, “Looks like they are quickly encircling those parts of General Jin’s army that are still fighting.”

Nifong flipped through the pages and asked, “Where are their vanguards headed?”

“We don’t know,” the younger soldier admitted glumly, “All we know is that one column was on the road to Edo and will probably get there sometime tonight. The whole north end of the Nasu plain is afire, General.”

“How are they moving so fast?”

The aide hesitated a moment before replying, “They have new machines, sir.”

“Describe them to me.”

The young Captain described the Fire Nation’s latest invention in some detail. The machines spread panic and terror amongst Jin’s men. Retreat had turned into a route. Deng said nothing while the younger man spoke.

“I see,” Nifong replied, “And how has the general staff reacted to this news?”

“They’re concerned, General. I left right after the news arrived, but a huge fight had already broken out between those who want to stick around and defend the Nasu and the rest who want to abandon
it and attack Mequon. They’re saying that this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for to kick the Fire Nation out of the Earth Kingdom and that we shouldn’t waste it. Either way, it won’t be long before everyone starts asking for orders.”

“Of course you’re correct.” Then turning to face his companion for the first time in the interview he inquired, “So, is she ready then?”

Without blinking an eye or betraying any hint that the question was a non-sequitur, the aide replied, “Yes, sir. She’s waiting for you now.”

The Earth Kingdom general allowed himself a slight smile and replied, “Thank you, Captain. Tell Madame Wu I will join her in a few minutes. Dismissed.”

The young soldier exchanged salutes with his superior and left the way he had come.

When certain that he was alone, Nifong drew a mighty breath and squatted low. Spreading his arms wide with him palms upward he raised a perfectly circular pillar of stone before him. With a twist of his hands the top of the pillar became crenellated and a pattern raised itself on its exposed face. Although the pillar was only a few feet high, he raised a stone to serve as a single step almost as an afterthought. Standing up straight, he then walked up onto the top of the pillar. The pattern on the top of the pillar was the solid, familiar emblem of the Earth Kingdom. He knelt when he reached the center, his arm resting on knee as he began his prayer.

Spirit of the Earth, hear now this prayer from thy most humble servant. Thy divine guidance has ever been the author of my victories and the safeguard of thy people. Yet now the Fire Nation has once again chosen to make war upon us. My heart should overflow with confidence, but it does not. My dreams are dark, and the shadows by day seem so much longer than they used.

I raise my voice now to thee in prayer as I feel the rapid approach of some great turn of events, and beg thee once more for thy divine favor in the struggle to come.

Grant us, O Spirit of the Earth, understanding of our enemy, for courage, strength, determination and skill at arms we hath ourselves in abundance. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon thee that, armed with thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and restore the sacred balance among men and nations.

Deng opened his eyes and stood once more. With a single glance toward the Dune Sea before him, he turned and stepped off the altar of living stone. As he walked back to camp, the pillar dropped back into the earth from which it had sprung.
The Reading

Chapter Summary

General Nifong turns to Aang and Katara's muse for guidance on his new Fire Nation adversary...

The waxing moon had long since set when Deng arrived at his camp. The sentries saluted as he passed. They, like his aide, had been with him for what seemed a lifetime and they were well aware of their commander’s pernoctations. The camp was asleep.

The Earth Kingdom general saw the tent he was looking for. It was the only one made of fabric and not of stone.

He stopped outside of the tent’s closed flap. Through its walls a warm light pulsed rhythmically, as if it were the heart of some giant organism. He could feel his own chest tightening as he hesitated. He looked up at the stars in a last, silent appeal for help before ducking into the tent.

Inside a young woman sat on a simple mat before a fire pit. The fire danced and waved wildly as the dry desert wood burned rapidly. A tripod held an iron vessel over the flames. Steam rose in a thick column off the water boiling within.

The woman had long, dark hair, a generous mouth and dark eyes. She looked at the much older man before her with an expression of relief and a concern too pained not to reveal something deeper. She reached up to him, but he waved her off as he dropped down on the mat opposite her.

“You have called, and I have come,” she said softly as she dropped her hand into her lap.

The tightening in his chest subsided as he looked at her. He smiled and said equally softly, “As you always have, you have come to help save our people.”

“And always will,” she replied, looking back up at the Earth Kingdom general with intensity in her voice and despair in her eyes,”– for you.”

Their eyes locked for a moment longer before Deng broke contact. Looking down he saw the colorful, wide backs of the cards at her feet.

“We should start,” he began apologetically. “Is he asleep?”

She closed her eyes in concentration, and after a brief pause replied, “He is,” her voice suddenly calm and certain. She opened her eyes once again, but as she looked at him, he could tell she no longer saw him.

“Have you set your heart on this course, my Lord? You know that my gift is revelation, but I cannot control what the cards and the Spirits who speak through them will reveal. Such knowledge can be dangerous, and once revealed it cannot again be concealed.” She spoke as if reading from a religious text, though the feeling behind her warning permeated her speech.

Nifong reached behind his back and untied the clasps of his breastplate, which he removed and placed carefully beside him. Turning back to the young woman he replied, “I understand, but you
know this must be done.”

“Our enemy approaches,” he continued, “You have heard the drum beats and seen the fires from afar. Already my commanders wrangle over what to do. Shall we fight them here and now? Shall we bide our time until the winter comes to our aid? Or, shall we dare great deeds and seek to win the ultimate prize? If we were to conquer Mequon, the war might soon be over.”

Then, he sighed, and in a softer voice continued, “Ah, if only I could do this, this one thing,” he reached out a hand and curled a lock of the young woman’s hair back behind her ear from where it had fallen, “to end this war forever. We could all start new lives. The world could wake up from this nightmare and live again. It is all I have ever prayed for, all I have ever wanted,” he looked away from her and continued, “For twenty years I’ve fought, but the war seems to have a life of its own. How strange it seems now that I fight not the Fire Nation, but the war itself.”

Nifong shook his head as if to clear such thoughts from him mind and he looked once more at his companion with a slight smile, “See how I drift now in my own thoughts? I think of philosophy, the Spirits and the virtues of a simpler life amidst the maelstrom.” Nifong’s expression hardened as he continued, “The war has a new face, the face of Prince Xian of the Fire Nation. If I am to destroy him, I must understand him. The Dai Li identified the leader of this new army months ago as the Fire Lord’s nephew, the one who grew to fame under General Shu, but that is all. The Dai Li give names and dates, but nothing useful, nothing about the man. They know nothing,” he concluded, not without bitterness in his voice.

“That is enough. When was he born?” He told her and she replied, “Then let us begin.”

Nifong removed the leather vest and peasant shirt he wore under his armor. Bare chested, he rose to his feet and dragged his mat directly in front of the fire. He dropped the mat and sat down on his knees. Grabbing the two closest legs of the tripod with his hands he leaned over into the steam rising from the iron. Sweat began to pour off him as the heat from the fire and the steam struck his body.

She spoke from somewhere behind him, “You shall be a vessel for your enemy as this iron is a vessel for this water.”

The young woman suddenly appeared opposite him. “Close your eyes, my lord, and breathe deeply,” she ordered calmly. The general complied. He was dimly aware of the woman opening small containers and heard the brief, but unmistakable sounds of glass bottles knocked against each other. The light of the fire prevented his eyelids from providing complete darkness. The steam, the heat, the sweat and the rosy light that filtered through his eyelids yielded an unpleasant experience. This was compounded by the periodic popping of the dry wood as it burned, which caused small pieces of hot ash to land on his arms and knees. The pit in his stomach had no relation to these uncomfortable sensations, but rather to his fear of what was to come. Though they had done this many times together, it was nevertheless an experience both he and the fortuneteller dreaded.

After some time Deng heard the young woman start dropping things into the boiling water. The steam became acrid and he began to cough violently. The tripod shook as his grip tightened and he fought against his natural instinct to withdraw.

“Breath!” she commanded in an urgent tone.

Deng breathed, but felt no air enter his lungs. His muscles moved, his chest cavity expanded, but he felt nothing fill it. He opened his eyes involuntarily, but his vision was distorted by salty tears.

“Close your eyes!”
Still choking, he closed his eyes once more, this time so tightly that it caused him pain as he tried to drive away salty, acidic tears that burned horribly. He tried to exhale the breath he had never drawn. His chest and lungs shrank in volume, but again he felt no wind pass over his lips.

Then, when the excruciating sensation was finally causing him to panic, something else was added to the vessel and the steam changed once again. The smell turned almost instantaneously from acrid to saccharine. The sensation of breathing returned to him. As he gasped for air he could feel the burning sensation in his lungs smothered as if by a blanket of warm snow. Breathing deeply of the sweet steam, the heat of both the flames and the vapor began to lose their grip on his consciousness. The fire popped, depositing a fragment of burning wood on his arm, but he did not notice.

With great relief he felt himself recede within his own mind and body. He dimly perceived his own breath, but the sensory perception of his extremities was gone. Disconnected from his surroundings, he drifted on a calm internal sea, his body a great hollow shell around him. As if from far away he heard the young woman begin to speak or chant. The words were indistinguishable, but they rose in tempo and power.

As the fortuneteller continued, the serenity of his mind was suddenly broken. In one sickening motion, Deng felt his whole self rush forward at amazing speed. The sensation of acceleration was horrifying as he had no body with which to feel it. He opened his mind’s eye and was horrified to see nothing at all. A great blackness rushed at him, the void which terrifies all who fear death.

Then, as suddenly as the acceleration had begun, it was gone. This sensation was replaced by the certainty that he was not alone. A visitor now in his own consciousness, he felt small amidst the caverns of his mind. All about him he could feel the enormity of another being.

His mind’s eye suddenly flashed white and then filled with a vision, occupying the void that had so terrified him. An image of an old man with a severe countenance and a finger pointed down at him from a dais was replaced with a startlingly clear visage of the sun setting over a great city. Swept along by the power of these visions, or perhaps memories, Deng had no choice but to allow the sensations of each to wash over him. He felt briefly the soft, warm flesh of a naked woman as the memory of the other’s first embrace was replaced by the image of a Fire Nation family, dressed in white. Near them stood a funeral pyre. He saw rather than felt the hand of the other reach out to the figure on the pyre, but he could not touch it.

The vision ended as the young woman began speaking again, and this time Deng could hear the words.

“How can you hear me, Prince?” she asked.

“Yes,” his mouth answered, though Deng had not moved his lips, “Where am I?”

“You are safe. Open your eyes.”

His eyes opened. Deng saw through them, but could not move them himself.

“Come over here and sit down in front of me.”

Without feeling the movement, Deng was aware of his body rising and walking over to where the cards lay. A moment later the young woman faced him once again.

“Show me your hands.”

His hands raised themselves of their own accord. Into them she placed the large deck of cards.
“Shuffle these cards and think of what concerns you most. Return them to me when you are done.”

His body held the cards, hesitating. “Why do I do this? I am so tired, I must sleep.”

“But you are asleep, Prince,” she answered in a soothing voice, “this is just a dream. When you finish what I have asked, you will sleep well the rest of the night and wake refreshed.”

Slowly his hands began to shuffle the cards. Though Deng could not feel his hands, he felt the thick texture of the cards. In this strange netherworld they seemed to give off a heat of their own. When he was finished he held them out to the fortuneteller, who took them in silence. She looked at the cards for a moment, and placed them before her. Then she stood up and walked behind his kneeling body.

For a few moments Deng simply experienced the odd weight of the double consciousness inhabiting his body. Looking out upon the world as if from the bottom of a well, he was totally unprepared for the sudden, acute pain of two sharp blows that landed simultaneously on either side of his head. The pain was accompanied by an almost audible popping sound as the fortuneteller’s cupped palms forced air into Deng’s ear canals. In an instant, the other was gone and, like a air bubble rising to surface from the bottom of the ocean, Deng expanded back into his own body. Shuddering uncontrollably he fell over sideways, muscle spasms wracking him as his mind struggled to reassert control.

The young woman walked around Deng’s body as he flopped around on the floor like a dying fish. Carefully she removed the still steaming vessel from the tripod and, opening a flap at the back of the tent, threw out its contents. Turning back to her lordly guest she saw that the spasms were subsiding.

With a final tremble the tremors departed. Deng breathed heavily as relief and a profound weariness swept his body. He was no longer young, and though the life of a soldier had kept him fit, his body made clear each time he was forced to do this that the next might be his last.

He opened his eyes slightly as he felt a damp cloth wipe the sweat off his forehead and saw the young woman staring down at him, her face drawn in concern. He felt her hand slip into his and grip it tightly.

“Don’t,” she said as he tried to get up. “Just lie there.”

He squeezed her hand and replied, “All right.”

She leaned over, lifted his head and placed a pillow underneath.

“Tell me, now. What did you see?”

He related to her the visions of the old man, the sun over a great city, the woman and the family in white.

She reflected for a moment before squeezing his hand once and sitting down beside him on her mat. Deng rolled over onto his side to see the area between them, the wet cloth falling down on the floor. A few feet away lay the deck of cards his hands had shuffled.

“Now I shall cast for him The Tree of Life.”

She picked up the deck, drew the first card and flipped it over. The Knight of Cups. Carefully she lay it down before her. She drew the second card and turned it over. The Two of Swords, and placed it directly above the first card. The third soon appeared, The Five of Cups, which she placed to the right of the second card. Here she stopped and pondered a moment before speaking.
Pointing to the Knight of Cups she explained, “The first card drawn is the Significator card. It represents the person for whom the spread has been made.” She looked at the three cards for a moment before beginning her interpretation in a clear, confident voice, “This Prince Xian is a good man in the eyes of all around him, my lord, a decent man in a corrupt age. He is generous, loyal, open and trusting to those he loves. He loves many, and despises few.”

Nifong looked down, unhappy at this news, “How can such a man exist among the high and mighty of the Fire Nation? And why has such a man been sent against me now?”

She looked over to him and replied, “I have no answers for those questions. You know well how this must be, my lord,” the young woman chided gently. “This reading will tell nothing of the future, only of possibilities. Through these cards the Spirits will speak of his state of mind and consciousness, his hopes, fears and that which defines him. It will not tell you what to do. You can only take what is shown and decide what do on your own.”

“I know,” replied Nifong with a sigh.

“But that is not all the Spirits tell us with this card. This man sees the true worth of men and takes their measure with ease, but he is also naturally cautious and seldom quick to act or judge. Now, let us hear what the rest have to tell…”

In rapid succession now she flipped over eight more cards and placed them in a pattern before her. The cards all had painted faces on them, the figures wearing elaborate clothing and captured in different poses. Some held scepters and wore crowns, others juggled cups, or wielded swords. A few were dominated by their inscriptions, “The Tower” and “Death”.

Nifong exhaled the breath he had been unconsciously holding and pointed at the Two of Swords above the Significator card, “So, what does he want? This position is what he seeks to achieve, right?”

The young fortuneteller looked up at the general and smiled slightly, “You remember much, my lord.”

“Doesn’t this one represent peace?”

“Yes, my lord, peace, but not necessarily between men or nations. Prince Xian seeks peace of mind. He is torn… tortured by disappointment, so much that he is not as mindful of the present as he should be,” she said, indicating the third card, the Five of Cups, “but he is not the one disappointed, another is.”

“How can you tell it is not he who is disappointed?”

“The card is inverted, and…” she said, pointing to the crowned figure on the card to the left of the Two of Swords, “The Emperor has appeared. Someone this man holds in high regard has turned against him or… perhaps better to say the connection between them is broken and Xian seeks to mend it.”

Suddenly Deng remembered the old man on the dais, “Azulon?”

“Perhaps. The Fire Lord has placed great expectations on his nephew, of that there can be no doubt. Perhaps his father, who fell long ago on the banks of the Song.”

Nifong sighed. This was not what he’d expected, but it seldom was.

“What troubles you, my lord?”
“I expected a young hot head, another bloodthirsty, vainglorious monster, burning with hatred and seeking revenge against the man who he’d probably blame for his father’s death. Instead, you tell me I face a decent man.”

“You expected…?” the young woman questioned.

Nifong, careful not to disturb the cards, swung out his feet and sat up cross legged. Placing his hands together and resting them on his thighs he continued, “I… hoped for that. Yes, I hoped. It’s easier that way, to believe you are ridding the world of evil. How much harder it is, when the face of your enemy is kind.” Nifong looked down into his lap and continued softly, “We defend our land, our people, our freedom, but I can’t help but to think, after burying bodies for twenty years, there is not one shred of justice in this war.”

The fortuneteller raised a hand to her quivering lip, for the general’s confessions disturbed her, “Have you lost faith, then, my lord?”

Nifong looked up, a smile sliding down over his face like a veil, “When in doubt, I’m too well trained in my duty to do anything but go on. Fear not. Now,” he said, drawing her attention back to the cards, “what else do you see?”

Still shaken, the fortuneteller returned once more to her cards, “The whole spread speaks of confusion and fear, fear of loss, fear of choice, fear of death. He wants to please, but doesn’t see how. His ability to see the truth which has served him so well in life, represented here by The Tower,” she said pointing at the card bearing that name below and to the right of the Significator, “is overshadowed… clouded by his fears.”

“His friends and subordinates are fiercely loyal, but he is opposed by the Prince of Disks – here,” she said, indicating the card of the same name. The figure on this card had one body, but had a face on both sides of its head. It had four hands, each of which held an object, a sword, a bow, a scale and a scroll.

“This person is a man of tremendous ambition and determination, but his path is unclear as well. The Spirits do not reveal in this spread what his fate will be.”

Nifong looked down once again and frowned slightly. The fire had begun to burn low. “And the Death card? What is it’s meaning here? I know it seldom means physical death.”

“Of course he may die, my lord, but you are right to say that isn’t what the card means here. The Death card in many oracle decks is called “Rebirth” or “Transformation”, and often means some kind of major change. In this spread, it means, in conjunction with the inverted Six of Wands, that during this great turn of events he will win by losing, and all that was before these events will change irrevocably.”

“What does that mean? Will I defeat him on the battlefield, then?”

“I don’t know, my lord,” she replied, “Fortunetelling is an imprecise art, at best.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the Earth Kingdom general replied sternly, getting once more to his feet. “The Spirits have revealed enough. I now know how to beat the man. Now I must learn how to beat his machines.”

Deng walked over to his clothes where they still lay neatly on the floor where he had placed them. He picked them up. Still stinking with sweat, he would put them on after he washed.

The young woman got to her feet and stood in front of him. The clear voiced, confident fortuneteller
was gone, replaced by the concerned, wide eyed young woman who had greeted him when he had entered.

“Will you let come with you, my lord?” she pleaded, though she knew the answer would be what it had always been. “Please.”

He brushed aside her hair once again and shook his head, “No, the time for a new life has not yet come,” he replied. As looked into her dark eyes he could not help but feel hope spring forth within him, “Pray for our victory, and perhaps both our prayers will be answered.”

Without thinking she stepped forward and kissed him. He hesitated only a moment before putting his arms about her and kissing her back.

He released her and said, “Now go, go tonight. Go far away from the Nasu, for I will fight him here. Find a good place, a safe place and wait for me. I will find you.”

He kissed her once more on the forehead as she cried softly in sorrow, clinging to his neck. She hugged him fiercely until he gently disengaged her. She stepped back as he turned to leave.

“I will go, but how long will I wait, my lord?” she asked as he gained the exit of the tent.

He turned once more and replied, “I do not know, perhaps the cards can tell you.”

With that he left. Wracked with uncertainty she eyed the cards that had not been used in Prince Xian’s reading. They lay in a neat pile a few feet from her. Making her decision, she gathered them to her and cast a reading for the other mind that had shuffled the cards that night. When finished, she cast the spread and wept.

In the morning she was gone, just as she had promised, but Deng Zev Nifong never saw her again.
Chapter Summary

The Fire Nation blitzkrieg begins.

The echoes of Gao’s voice traveled up and down the banquet hall until silence reigned. Zuko looked first at his uncle, who appeared lost in thoughts of melancholy as he stroked his unkempt beard, then at Trimazu, who was looking past Iroh with a similar expression.

After a few more moments the Storyteller concluded, “That morning, after seeing that the young Fortuneteller had obeyed his command, he began to order his army’s affairs for the long struggle ahead. Thus did General Nifong prepare for his final conflict with the Fire Nation.”

At this the Storyteller broke, as if between the acts of a play. Many audience members used the pause as an opportunity to shift in their seats, motion to a servant for a refill or, as Gao himself did, take a long drink from a nearby glass.

The young Prince turned away from his neighbors to look stonily at the panorama before him. He felt sure the gibberish about Nifong’s odyssey was a fool’s tale, but this was not the time to question his uncle about it. He brooded silently over the many other questions raised by the Storyteller’s tale, but they too would have to wait for a more appropriate time, so he suppressed them viciously.

With no other outlet for his swirling emotions, a question borne of selfish anger erupted in his mind, “Why did he hide all this from me?” The anger converted instantly to shame, however, as another, quieter part of him answered without hesitation, “Because you never thought to ask.” Unnoticed by anyone the banished Prince blushed slowly and looked down.

The audience settled as Gao resumed his position and began anew…

“But now you must see them in an altogether different light,” said the Storyteller as he raised his hand and the power of his voice slowly increased, “See them now as enemies of the Earth Kingdom, enemies whose twin goals were nothing less than the destruction of our nation and the enslavement of our people! For it is a truth of life that good men are often the authors of the most terrible evils. So it was with Prince Xian and Prince Iroh during the Summer of Terror.”

“Oh yes, my friends, now we are come to the dark times. The Fire Nation’s mighty armored legions made possible an entirely new way of battle. Years of preparation, training and planning had resulted in the lethally precise art of “Go-Shen” or “lightning war”, an art which Prince Xian did unleash upon the world in the course of this dreadful conflict. Without pity or mercy, the Fire Nation once again put forth its power to all crush those who stood against it.”

“As the armies of the Fire Lord advanced and the great cities of the Nasu fell before them, tens of thousands of Earth Kingdom soldiers resisted magnificently, but to no avail. The Summer of Terror lasted barely four months, but during that time defeat after crushing defeat yielded at last a rout
without order and without purpose. It was, to all outward appearances, the beginning of the end, a
time when every heart looked into the future and saw only the gathering darkness…”

Nikon removed his helmet as he ducked into the tent housing Xian’s headquarters. It was stifling hot
inside. The sun beat down relentlessly outdoors, but there was at least a pleasant breeze. The stench
from the still burning city of Edo behind them, however, was inescapable. Though damaged, that
mighty city of over a hundred thousand had been captured largely intact and with few casualties. The
Fire Lord had been pleased.

As usual, Iroh’s friend was in an excellent mood. The uncharacteristically dark thoughts that had
plagued him after Master Chen’s arrest had departed almost as soon as he had set foot in the Earth
Kingdom. Though under Tien Shin’s nominal command, Nikon had seen little of him since the
Battle of the Arno more than three weeks ago, a fact that improved his attitude tremendously.

Most importantly, his men had performed with skill and honor, and the Earth Kingdom defenders
had been destroyed with startling ease. Though he himself had ridden in the point tank many a day
and night, the unflinching terror which Chieng Shiung’s metal monsters inspired among the enemy
hardened considerably the young commoner’s sense of security. Nikon had often chuckled to himself
at this conceit. How much easier it was to be brave when the most you saw of your enemy was his
backside!

He wiped the sweat and dirt off his brow with the edge of the black sash around his waist and
surveyed the outer chamber of Xian’s mobile abode. The two soldiers on guard inside the tent
saluted smartly. Nikon returned the salute with a smile on his face and stepped lightly into the interior
of the tent.

Two figures in Fire Nation uniforms were hunched over the high, rectangular table that dominated
the room. As he approached he could see a large map spread upon it. The two hovered over the map
and worked furiously with colored pencils to mark the position of the front lines, the motion of
various units and the identity and strength of various enemy formations. The men at the table paid no
attention to the newcomer. A messenger squeezed past Nikon on his right and approached the elder
of the two figures. A piece of paper changed hands, the messenger saluted and left.

As the messenger raced by him once again, Nikon smiled broadly and proceeded to rush up between
the two figures at the table. Laughing loudly, Nikon looped an arm around the neck of both men and
squeezed them together.

“Haha! My map buddies!” the young commoner exclaimed merrily. The sentries began sputtering
with laughter behind them as both “map buddies” grimaced and tried in vain to extricate themselves
from Nikon’s iron grip. He gave them both another hearty squeeze as he concluded with both humor
and genuine affection, “I love you guys!” The young tank commander, beside himself with
suppressed laughter, released them as they began to curse loudly and struggle against him in earnest.

Straightening his uniform after finally freeing himself, the taller of the two rolled his eyes and replied
with a sour expression on his face, “Yes, Commander… you know we feel the same way.”

The other, far older “map buddy” then entreated in a surly, but strangely tolerant tone, ‘Great Spirits,
Commander, must you do that every time you come here?”

“You know it, my old friend,” Nikon replied with his trademark toothy grin and an impudent wink.
Then, adopting a more serious countenance he approached the map board and enquired, “Okay, so,
what’s going on with the Fire Lord’s march to victory on this glorious day? Any word on Nifong?”
Brushing himself off and approaching the table the elder man replied, “We’ve received a few unconfirmed reports, but nothing conclusive.”

Nikon nodded once and asked, “Okay, has Ryu reached Inchon yet?”

“Yes, but he requested and was granted permission to bypass it and make directly for Shimonoseki. Apparently they were able to reinforce the city via monorail before Ryu could destroy it.”

“All right. Do we know how many they’ve got penned up in there?”

“They estimated between six and eight thousand.”

Nikon pointed at a thin line connecting several cities on the map that headed east to end near the headwaters of the mighty Arno, “So, he’s headed east using the Jade Highway?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“So they should be in position to penetrate the eastern escarpment and reach Lake Myojin within…” Nikon’s forehead creased as he tried to calculate the distance. Ryu was the vanguard of the army at this point as he had encountered the least resistance. Still, half the Nasu plain lay between him and the passes of the Ping Tou Mountains.

“Four weeks,” supplied the old soldier, “if they continue to get a free ride.”

“That’s unlikely, though,” injected the younger man as he handed several dispatches to Nikon, “We’ve gotten half a dozen of these in the past few days, Commander. An Earth Kingdom relief army is on its way from the lake region up north.”

Nikon glanced through the papers and handed them back, “Excellent, haha! It’s about time Ryu and Tien Shin earned their keep!”

“And what about you, Commander?” inquired the elderly man, “You’ve pushed much farther to the south than called for by the plan, and now there’s a lot of action developing behind you near Nomura.”

Laughing he replied, “Yeh, but the plan was to make a pocket around that area anyway, right? Besides,” he concluded with another wink, “I still made it to Cam’ron before our beloved daimyo, didn’t I?”

Allowing himself a slight, uneasy smile the old man replied, “Yes, Commander, that you did.”

“Well, I’m glad to see someone around here is still in a good mood,” remarked a familiar, patient voice from in front of them.

The three looked up to see General Xian enter the chamber from a flap on the opposite side of the tent. In his armor he looked much taller and more imposing than he had when Nikon had first met him so many months ago. In his right hand he carried the red baton of command, the symbol of his authority over the Army of the Great Divide. General Ho had been relieved to surrender this artifact as soon as Xian had arrived. A broken man, General Ho had thanked Xian profusely for assuming command and departed on the same tide on which the new army had arrived.

Xian returned the proffered salutes by raising his baton to his forehead with a weak smile. Though the gesture was confident, it looked to Nikon as if his best friend’s cousin hadn’t slept in weeks. His eyes seemed sunken amidst the blue black pits of his eye sockets. A second sweep over his superior revealed that Xian had also clearly lost weight, though the armor did well to conceal it.
“Good to see you, General. Are you well?” he asked, unable to prevent his tone from betraying his genuine concern.

A shadow passed over Xian’s face, but it passed quickly as he replied, “I’m fine, Commander. We’re all short of sleep these days.”

Nikon frowned. This was obviously a lie, but what could be the matter? The war was going much better than planned – or even hoped. The young commoner looked quickly over at the map keepers, saw the concern in their eyes, and turned back to where Xian rubbed his temples in a giveaway gesture of exhaustion.

After a few moments Nikon cleared his throat and said, “You sent for me, General?”

Xian snapped his head up, and as if waking from a dream replied, “Yes, yes I did.”

The general walked over to the map table and gestured for the brigade commander to follow him. Xian then turned and indicated the position of the 5th Armored Brigade on the map, some hundred leagues away to the southeast.

“Commander, your drive to Cam’ron has been brilliant. You have proven resourceful, determined, and brave as I knew you would be,” he turned to face Nikon, but despite his words he did not smile, “but now I must ask, why have you swung so far south? Your orders were to head due east after Third Corps captured Argento and completed its pivot eastward.”

Nikon’s smile faltered and then dropped entirely. He suddenly became aware that everyone in the room was watching him.

Abashed, he pointed at a thin line on the map and replied, “Well, sir, uh, the daimyo took the Cam’ron road away from me, so that left my outfit without a job. Then one of our recon units found a mining village on the edge of the Dune Sea southeast of us. More importantly they reported it was actually sitting on an east – west road that wasn’t on any of our maps,” growing more excited he continued, “There weren’t any enemy units around, so I jumped at the opportunity. I mean, we took the town without a fight, captured the other half of General Jin’s baggage train that we didn’t already have, and still got to Cam’ron two days before Tien Shin!”

The young commoner’s hope that this explanation would please his commanding officer was dashed as the General continued to regard Nikon gravely in silence.

“I see,” Xian replied softly after a few moments.

Nikon flushed bright red and looked down in shame. Xian’s disappointment was painfully obvious. Though he loved Iroh as a brother, somehow the thought of disappointing this man who had more confidence in him than he had in himself was more dreadful than any other possibility.

“So humbling Tien Shin was worth doubling the number of earthbenders Prince Iroh must now destroy in the pocket around Nomura that you and the daimyo have created behind you?”

“What?” the young commoner asked in shock.

Xian shook his head and continued in a tired voice, “To execute “Go-Shen” properly we must control the size of the pockets we create, Commander. You know this. Encircle too few and we fail to maximize the damage done to our opponents. Encircle too many and the hunters become the hunted.”

“If you had obeyed orders you’d have split off at least another three divisions of Earth Kingdom
infantry – you did not need the Cam’ron road to do that. And now with half your tanks broken down due to the exertion of your ill-advised race to Cam’ron, you are no longer in a position to help Iroh, are you?"

The question hung in the air, leaden and terrifying in its implication. After a moment Xian concluded in a soft and devastating voice, for Nikon knew that no satisfactory reply could be made, “I asked you to help me whip these people, Commander. You have disappointed me.”

The words came as crushing blows, more devastating than any stones that rained down from the heavens during the Battle of the Arno. Struck dumb by Xian’s rebuke, Nikon sank to his knees and bowed his head. The sentries and map keepers looked upon the young commander with a mixture of pity and embarrassment, for as much as they genuinely liked him; they knew the censure was warranted.

Seeing the young man’s pain, Xian’s expression softened. He placed a hand on Nikon’s shoulder and said, “It’ll be all right, Nikon. Learn from your mistake. Vanity is a disease that works tirelessly to destroy even the best of men, and there is no cure for it. Control it as best you are able, and remember that we are all dependent on each other to achieve the goal set for us by the Fire Lord.”

Finding his voice, Nikon replied thickly, “Forgive me, General. I want you and Prince Iroh to be proud of me.”

“We are proud of you. You will have a long and glorious life, if only you have the good sense to live it.”

Xian looked away and seemed to drift once again as he had earlier. Finally Nikon looked up to see his commanding officer staring past them again at nothing in particular. Xian broke the silence and looked back to Nikon, saying, “Nifong’s out there somewhere… waiting for me. Will you be there when the time comes?”

Without hesitation the reply came, “Yes, General, I will.”

“Then you will have done all that you can. As for Prince Iroh, he will be tested at Nomura. If he falls, we will be in real trouble. If he crushes the pocket, nothing will stand in our way except Nifong himself. We will see what kind of man he is.”

Whether Xian was referring in his last statement to Nifong or Iroh, Nikon never knew.
Prince Iroh is tested at the Battle of Nomura.

Iroh choked as he inhaled a lungful of the black, oily smoke that billowed out of the burning headquarters tent. All around him he heard the cries of wounded and dying men, many of them his own. The laments of the forsaken were punctuated only by the clang of metal on metal and the dull thudding of the huge stones that rained down seemingly from the heavens themselves. The wind shifted, blowing the poisonous cloud away, to reveal the bloody knot of ferocious combat before him. The camp and the east west road that ran through it were awash with struggling, swearing, dead and dying soldiers. The smoke, which burned his throat terribly, had at least momentarily covered the reek of the burning corpses that littered the makeshift battlefield. Iroh suppressed the urge to vomit at the overpowering stench of death.

Breathing raggedly, the Crown Prince spun around on his feet and rapidly scanned the scene. The military police and the headquarters staff were now engaged in desperate hand to hand combat with enemy infantry. The melee raged fiercely without order and without mercy. Uncoordinated firebending attacks had set most of the camp aflame. Forcing himself to breathe regularly, Iroh’s brain reeled from the realization that less than ten minutes ago the camp had been about its usual business. Now he and his men were fighting for their lives.

Their position was hopeless. The enemy had charged without warning over the low hill behind the camp. After the initial shock had driven back the panicked defenders, the enemy had formed three firing lines at different heights along the slope of the hill. These grim and resolute earthbenders worked in unison to rain boulders down on the camp, killing both Iroh’s men and the Earth Kingdom infantry indiscriminately. Their strategy was brutal and effective. Soon, Iroh knew, he and his men would be dead.

Before he could complete his survey or reflect further upon the grim fate that was almost certainly in store for them, Iroh caught sight of a gritty Earth Kingdom warrior removing his sword from the corpse of a Fire Nation soldier a few feet to his right. Sensing eyes upon him even amidst the battle, the earthbender looked up to meet the Crown Prince’s gaze. With a roar the rough man lunged at Iroh, who stepped blithely out of the way. He struck the back of his assailant’s neck as he passed, knocking him to the ground, limp and unconscious.

The victory proved ephemeral, however, as two other green clad men appeared to take the fallen soldier’s place. Both lifted rocks out of the ground and kicked them at Iroh, who rolled to the ground to allow the boulders to pass over him. Certain his prostrate position would cost him his life, the Crown Prince was relieved to look up and see a sword protruding from the stomach of one of the Earth Kingdom soldiers who had just shot at him. The stricken man’s companion had only a moment to turn to his dying friend and the young Fire Nation soldier who had dealt the fatal blow before both were killed by the sudden impact of a boulder the size of a mill stone.

The dull thudding of the stones hitting the ground grew to an ear splitting crescendo as Iroh regained his feet. He turned to see an Earth Kingdom soldier take aim at him from a distance with a large stone. He drew a sharp breath in anticipation of the attack, only to catch a glimpse of yet another
green clad soldier, this one wearing a fine breastplate of steel, approach him from his left. The newcomer was already in the middle of swinging his sword at him when in a split second Iroh grabbed the man’s wrist and pulled him into the path of the oncoming rock. The Earth Kingdom officer’s face froze in a twisted mask of horror an instant before his head exploded in a bloody shower of bone and brain.

Ignoring the collapse of the headless corpse, Iroh launched two fireballs in rapid succession from his fists at the soldier who had hurled the fatal rock. Both blasts hit their target, one in the face and the other in the chest. The Earth Kingdom soldier screamed in agony as his hands flew to his face in a vain attempt to stop his skin from melting off his skull.

A Fire Nation soldier approached the burning man with his sword drawn, but was stopped by another who shouted, “No! Let him burn!”

Stepping sideways the Crown Prince turned to see his own death rushing towards him. No less than half a dozen earthbenders jumped gracefully over the fallen bodies of his staff just a few yards away. As Iroh began firing blast after blast at his assailants in a last ditch effort to stave off death, he felt the ground begin to shake beneath him in resonance with the ear splitting thudding that had been steadily building throughout the fight. Both he and his attackers were thrown off balance. As the world wobbled, Iroh could see the green clad men on the hill flail about as well.

He turned to his right to look west down the road and fell to his knees. His assailants did likewise. The last sight they ever saw was the column of Fire Nation tank trains hurtling down the road towards them at amazing speed. Each tank train towed several towering pieces of artillery. Grey smoke belched forth from their smoke stacks as their treads chewed up the surface of the road, leaving the earth scarred and broken in their wake.

In the blink of an eye the lead tank train passed in front of Iroh no more than a few feet away. The sudden passing of such a huge amount of metal created a concussion of air that blew him backwards. Of the earthbenders who had been closing in on him there was no sign at all, they had simply ceased to exist. Struggling to recover, Iroh heard the protest of metal on metal as the tank trains applied their breaks. Soon after the lead tank train and its towage had passed, he saw the second ride up the hill, erasing dozens more of the green clad soldiers. Those who escaped the metal monsters scattered in terror.

Within moments a third and fourth tank train slid into the camp, their treads locked as they tried to slow down. The rear compartments of each machine then swung open allowing Fire Nation soldiers to disembark.

The expressions of the Earth Kingdom warriors still fighting in the camp did not change, even though it was clear the tide had turned against them. Iroh heard a cheer erupt from those of his men still alive. He could not raise his own voice to join them in celebration since he was at that moment knocked rudely to ground by a blunt object across his back. His breastplate protected him from the blow, but he found his face in the dirt once again.

Flipping himself over he saw a tall man in a grey uniform, briefly obscured by a cloud of the oily black smoke, deftly slice in two a fat earth kingdom soldier wielding a mallet.

The man in grey smiled and offered Iroh a hand to get up, remarking, “No more laying down on the job, your Highness, we’ve got work to do yet.”

“Gan!” exclaimed the Prince, happy for the second time that his bookish friend had joined them.

“None other,” his friend replied.
Iroh smiled in turn, took the proffered hand and lifted himself to his feet. Somewhere beyond them he heard a female voice as distinct as a signature yell, “Get your asses into this fight! You hear me? Now!”

They both turned to see Chieng, small in the distance atop the lead tank train, push several of her engineers off the top of the machine with a bo staff and into the fight still raging below. A moment later she dropped down after them and was lost from view.

Gan and Iroh turned without comment back to the battle. The fight was not over, but the arrival of the tank trains assured the outcome. The Earth Kingdom soldiers still within the burning camp quickly found themselves trapped. Unable to escape, they fought as men who cared nothing for their lives, but it was not enough to save them. Within minutes the carnage was over, the remnants of the Earth Kingdom infantry was slain.

Some time later, Chieng, her staff bloody and her face smeared with dirt, came upon Iroh and Gan kneeling next to the crushed corpse of a Fire Nation soldier. He was young, no more than a boy. His uniform, emblazoned with the symbol of the sun, marked him as a servant of the Crown Prince. Iroh, his head bowed in silent prayer, held the dead man’s hand in his own. Beside them lay the massive mill stone sized boulder that had felled him and a nearby earthbender.

The engineer walked up to them and remarked without preamble, “A pathetic performance all around, your Highness,” but Iroh and Gan paid her no attention. After several moments of what anyone else would have interpreted as an awkward silence the engineer pointed at the corpse and asked brusquely, “Well, who is this, then?”

“A brave young man,” Iroh replied gently, replacing the man’s hand on his broken chest, “who saved my life today at the cost of his own. I never even knew his name.”

Chieng’s gaze swept over the body and she nodded once before stating confidently, “He died with honor then, my Lord, and as long as you live he will not have died in vain.”

Gan turned to the dark haired woman in some surprise, for he had not expected such a sentiment from the foul mouthed engineer.

Iroh looked up at her briefly, then back to the corpse and said, “Thank you, Chieng, but I find that I now owe so many brave souls my life, I wonder how I will ever repay them.”

“Find our enemies and destroy them utterly, your Highness,” supplied Chieng, in an unintentional imitation of the Fire Lord’s command to Prince Xian months before.

“I intend to,” the Crown Prince replied solemnly. Rising to his feet he queried, “How much do you know of our situation here?”

“Very little,” Gan admitted, “as soon as we learned you were pinned down here at Nomura, we left Edo and got here as fast as we could.”

“Fine, get me your maps and I will explain,” commanded Iroh.

Soon the three sat around a duplicate of the large area map that had burned with the command tent. Two of Iroh’s surviving aides-de camp sat in attendance. Using a piece of charcoal Iroh directed the aides to mark the positions of friend and foe. The picture slowly became clear. Several thousand Earth Kingdom soldiers were surrounded in a pocket in the hill country in front of them. Iroh’s army in turn was bisected by the remains of General Jin’s infantry, much of which had been left unmolested as a result of Nikon’s southward deviation. The open plains east of the hills suggested
that Jin’s infantry was free to counterattack as soon as they could reach the Prince’s exposed besieging force.

“So, a pocket within a pocket?” mused Gan after Iroh concluded his description.

“Yes, that is what it will be if we don’t act fast. We can’t let that happen,” stated Iroh firmly. “To prevent a disaster we must crush this pocket immediately. I’ve used every trick in the book to delay open combat here long enough for you to arrive,” then turning to Chieng he said, “however, it may already be too late. You know now why I sent for you. Are you ready to deploy the artillery?”

“I am.”

“It must be in place by nightfall, Chieng, do you understand?”

Chieng indicated that she understood and left to carry out her orders.

By sunset a new headquarters had been set up on a nearby hillock. Chieng had provided for this by donating one of the train cars that had been loaded with artillery shells. Secure in their metal abode, the few survivors of Iroh’s staff did their best to plan the coming battle. Runners on mongoose dragons pulled up to the headquarters in quick succession and messenger hawks arrived at short intervals to deliver information about the enemy.

The final streaks of sunlight stained the sky to the west as Iroh peered through his field glasses at the enemy lines in front of him. The adrenalin fueled excitement from the morning had long since dissipated, leaving only the angst ridden air of expectation. The enemy, ragged and half starved from weeks of retreat, nevertheless remained a considerable fighting force.

Iroh handed the glasses to Gan, who queried, “How many in this bunch?”

“Brigade strength at least. Maybe two thousand.”

Gan scanned the low hills in front of them where heavily manned trenches could be seen in the fading light. Close by on their left and right the forward positions of Iroh’s infantry sheltered quietly behind their metal shields. The Fire Nation line stretched north and east quickly out of sight.

“How long have they been there?”

“Three days. We trapped and destroyed the other half of Gao’s division in a large ravine three or four leagues that way,” replied Iroh pointing west, “while my mongoose cavalry were trapping this group here.”

“You’ve been busy,” he commented, handing the glasses back.

“Yes, far busier than a lazy man like me had hoped,” the Crown Prince replied with a wry smile.

“How have you held them here for that long without engaging? Let me guess, you had them over for tea?”

“Oh, do you think they’d come?” Iroh quipped, his smile now threatening to break his face, “I have some of that lovely green tea we found in Edo!”

Gan laughed and was soon joined by his friend. As they spoke two mongoose dragons arrived, one behind the other. On the first, a young man with lieutenant bars, dark hair and traditional Fire Nation sideburns dismounted and approached them on foot. The second bore Chieng, now cleaned up with her dark hair pinned in a bun.
The eldest son of the Fire Lord turned and received the young man’s salute. Behind the messenger the engineer approached, hands behind her back, apparently interested to hear what news was about to be delivered.

“Good news, your Highness,” the young man said, offering Iroh a letter in a dark green envelope, “Colonel Gao has agreed to your terms.”

Iroh nodded once, threw a shrewd look at his friend and replied, “Thank you, Lieutenant Diem,” then, turning to look over Chieng he asked, “Is the artillery in place?”

The engineer nodded in the affirmative and Iroh declared with grim satisfaction, “Excellent. Then we will attack as planned.”

Confused, the young lieutenant offered the message once again to Iroh asking, “What about this, sir? Won’t we reply?”

Iroh laughed and responded, “Oh yes, we surely will! With fire and destruction we shall answer them!”

“But, sir, the enemy has offered to surrender…?”

The Crown Prince regarded the young soldier for a moment before replying, “And just what would we do with them, Lieutenant? The enemy outnumbers us by five to one at least. It is a shame these men must die, but die they will today.”

Diem locked eyes with Iroh momentarily before shifting his gaze to Gan, who wore a smile every bit as deadly as Iroh’s.

Chieng regarded Iroh calmly for a moment before stating flatly, “You will make an excellent Fire Lord, your Highness.”

Iroh turned to her in surprise. A strange mix of pleasure and embarrassment swept over him. A compliment from such a severe judge was indeed a rarity, but if Chieng was blunt in the delivery of her insults, she was no less emphatic when she bestowed her infrequent praise. They looked at each other for a moment before she turned and began to walk back to her dark and silent tank train.

“Aren’t you going to stay for the rest of the show?” Iroh called after her, “Your assistance is always welcome,” he continued in a hopeful tone, and much to his surprise he meant it.

Chieng turned and replied, “Not a chance, your Highness. I’m late to save Nikon’s ass out east. Looks like he took Cam’ron sooner than we hoped, but didn’t have any plan for holding onto it.”

“What do you mean,” Iroh queried with sudden concern.

“Yeh, it’s true. I just heard that your buddy broke half of my tanks trying to get to Cam’ron before Tien Shin,” she explained with bitterness, “I know he’s your friend, but he’s also an idiot, and now he’s been caught with his pants down.”

Infuriated at her attitude Iroh retorted fiercely, “So, instead of hurling insults, why don’t you get over there and get that armor back in action?”

Chieng regarded him coolly and replied, “I intend to, your Highness, since he is in as much need of my help as you were this morning.”

Understanding dawned on Iroh as he drew a long breath, “They’re under attack?”
Chieng nodded and replied, suddenly uncomfortable, “Yes, we received a messenger hawk from Southern Command almost at the same time as yours. Nifong has finally decided to make his move, and has attacked Nikon while he is overextended. I’m sorry.”

Iroh turned to Gan for confirmation and saw it instantly in his friend’s troubled eyes. Gan nodded and supplied glumly, “It’s true, your Highness. After your step brother took the Cam’ron road away from him, he found some other east - west highway not on the map and used it to beat Tien Shin to the city.”

His heart instantly aflame, Iroh exclaimed, “I’ve got to help him!” He turned to yell for his aides, but the engineer’s hand on his shoulder stopped him short, her grip firm but strangely gentle. The Crown Prince turned to her, fear and anger visible in his eyes.

“Don’t compound your friend’s mistake with another, Prince Iroh,” advised Chieng in a low voice, “I know you care for him, but you cannot help him now. You have your own fight here, one that you and your men will be hard pressed to win as it is.”

She was right, and he knew it. Her hand dropped from his shoulder. Iroh noticed the men nearby react to her inappropriate display of familiarity, but ignored it.

“His best hope,” continued Chieng in the same low voice, “ironically enough, lies with Tien Shin, who has wisely advanced without running his tanks into the ground. I’ve got to round up the rest of my column and get there as soon as possible. I’ll salvage what I can.”

Iroh raised a hand to his forehead in frustration before replying in a choked voice, “Then go, Chieng, and whatever you do, you mustn’t fail!”

A few moments passed before, locking eyes with Iroh, she declared, “I may not be a firebender,” she said, rapping the side of her tank train with the palm of her hand, “but I have other weapons the enemy has learned to fear! I will do all I can, my Lord, you have my word.”

The Crown Prince’s heart swelled with gratitude at the engineer’s oath. Her performance that morning gave him more hope of saving Nikon than anything possible from the man who hated his friend with such passion.

Chieng saluted. Iroh returned the gesture before springing forward and surprising her with a crushing bear hug, “I have no doubt about that. May the Spirit of the Sun protect you and bring you success,” holding back tears he continued, “Nikon’s a good man and a true servant of the Fire Nation.” He drew in another deep breath, “Please, don’t let him die on me.”

The engineer had stiffened on contact, but, after a brief hesitation, relaxed upon hearing Iroh’s plea. She hugged him back briefly and replied, “I won’t.”

With that she climbed up into her tank train. A few minutes later, her train roared to life and was gone, leaving only clouds of swirling dust on the road to Cam’ron.

He watched her leave, then walked back with Gan to where Diem still stood at his mongoose dragon awaiting orders.

“Lieutenant,” instructed Prince Iroh, “Order all batteries to fire at will.”
The audience reacts to Prince Iroh's cruelty, and Nikon faces the consequences of his decisions at the Battle of Cam'ron.

The crowd registered its displeasure at the storyteller's admission of Prince Iroh's treachery with boos and catcalls. Gao nodded his head soberly a few times at the audience's response and motioned with his outstretched arms for quiet.

"Yes, friends, it is true," he continued as the disturbance subsided, "That night the catapults and trebuchet of Chieng Shiung turned the grassy downs of Nomura into a sea of fire, and very few lived to tell the tale of the Crown Prince's deceit."

Zuko, transfixed against his will by the storyteller's art, now stole a glance at his uncle. Though he knew his uncle had had a successful military career before his infamous failure, Zuko had always thought of him as soft. Unexpected pride had swelled within Zuko's heart at the recounting of this tale, and the banished Prince felt the intense desire to question his uncle about it, but his hopes quickly faltered.

The retired general looked silently down at his hands, his face an impassive mask. Iroh could feel his nephew's eyes, but he refused to meet them. Locked away deep in the recesses of his own mind, he heard the catcalls of the audience as if from a distance. Or were they the screams of burning men? It was hard to tell. In his mind's eye he saw the hills afire, and rank upon rank of advancing Fire Nation soldiers. He couldn't remember much of his recent history with any clarity, but his memories of those days seemed sharper and clearer than even what he felt at this moment.

Shame washed over him like a cold river, painful and yet strangely comforting. It was not the first time he had felt it, and would not be the last. He had done many deeds he now knew to be dishonorable, and this was but one. It had taken him almost a lifetime to realize that the source of his shame was often not the acts themselves, but the realization that he had believed himself right when performing them, and the years he spent not only unrepentant of those acts, but remembering them with pride.

Not even the death of Xian and all the horrors that Iroh knew were yet to come from the aging storyteller had taught him the truth of his shame at Nomura. Although these memories remained clear, it was not these that welled up now to greet him. Instead, he shut his eyes and winced almost imperceptibly as he pushed the image of his son from his mind. No, he thought, now is not the time to remember you, my son, as I should. That loss is too great, and for your young cousin's sake I cannot risk discovery in this place. Forgive me, my son, that you had to die for me to learn the value of life will ever be my greatest shame.

"Yes!" came a now all too familiar booming voice, "That Iroh! What a bastard, haha! I daresay he will roast in hell for that one!"

Iroh grimaced at the voice, as he had done many times that night, but this time for a different reason.

"Even I leave my opponent's alive after I have skinned them!" Then, turning to his right and looking
past Iroh and Zuko continued, “Isn’t that right, Chen Ho?”

Chen looked up at his tormentor from where he sat in a wine soaked stupor twirling his mustache and replied thickly, “Oh yes, you’re well known for your mercy, Trimazu. Everyone knows you eat what you skin. You don’t get a figure like yours eating tofu.”

Trimazu laughed genuinely and replied, “Well spoken, my friend,” then continuing in his conspiratorial tone, “Trust me when I advise you to be in your cups when next we negotiate. I guarantee you’ll do better than you ever have before!”

A contemptuous snort was Chen’s only reply.

Gao then addressed the master of the house, saying, “Indeed, my lord, what you have said is true, though what I have described here was just one small skirmish. A complete catalog of the Fire Nation’s crimes that summer would surely fill Wan Shi Tong’s library past the brim! Unfortunately, Master Trimazu, the night speeds by, and I’m afraid I can offer your noble guests only those events that deal directly with the matters at hand.”

“And well you do it, my friend!” exclaimed the merchant merrily, slapping his knee, “Please continue,” he commanded, waving one of his heavily jeweled hands, “It sounds as if Deng the Hammer has Nikon in a bad way, and I’d hear more of that!”

The storyteller bowed low and turning back to the audience began, “While Prince Iroh waged war at Nomura and won himself great glory, far to the east the winds of change had begun to blow as the stage was set for the first, great reversal of fortune during the Summer of Terror…”

Nikon ducked the moment he heard the telltale rush of air that immediately preceded a boulder strike. An instant after he closed the upper hatch the stone struck the top of the tank and shattered into a cloud of dust and rock shards. Nikon grimaced as the insides of the machine rang like some enormous bell with the impact. It was the third time they’d been hit.

He opened one eye as the ringing diminished. Beneath and in front of him on his right the tank driver was frantically working the controls and yelling, “Come on! Come on! Damn you!” as he struggled desperately to keep them moving. The gunner on his left was rapid firing volley after volley of fiery blasts, while the gunner on his right was praying. He clearly had something to pray for, since the last boulder strike had caused the armor on his side of the machine to buckle. His firing port was not obstructed, but it was bent grotesquely inwards such that he would need to lean back upon the platform on which Nikon stood in order to have enough room to fire. In the back of the cockpit the rear gunner sat with his back against the engine compartment bulkhead where he’d died at least an hour before. Pale and with a trickle of dried blood from his mouth he looked merely asleep.

Placing his foot on the praying man’s shoulder Nikon admonished, ‘Hey, no time for that.”

The soldier jerked at the touch, turned and looked up at him. He had an impossibly young face, caked with dust and streaked with tears.

“If you stop firing, it gives them more opportunity to hit your side again,” he continued above the fractious noise of the engine, “Don’t make it any easier!”

The gunner nodded once and turned back to his firing port. Nikon reached up and grabbed the handle of the inner hatch. He thrust upward with a mighty heave. For a moment the hatch did not move, then slowly and with considerable protest it began to lift. A moment later dirt and rock fell into
the cockpit as the hatch swung open, adding to the existing pile at Nikon’s feet. With a final clang the hatch came to a rest in its open position, knocking several larger stones and more dust off the top and down the armored siding.

Iroh’s friend stood up and surveyed the scene as he quickly excavated the now severely damaged vent that carried his voice commands down to the driver and gunners. The battlefield was cloaked in a haze of dust and smoke. His entire brigade, or that part of it that had not broken down or been destroyed, was engaged in close combat with Nifong’s vaunted cavalry. The field was littered with Earth Kingdom dead as well as the occasional shell of a destroyed Fire Nation machine.

He watched as several tanks fired simultaneously at a farm house more than a mile away on the crest of a nearby ridge. Flames leapt to the heavens as the structure was engulfed in fire. To his right he could see no more than a thousand feet due to the smoke and dust of combat.

The battle had raged with varying intensity for days. All semblance of order and identifiable front lines had broken down the day before when Chieng had arrived. The enemy had tried in vain to stop her arrival, but had paid for the attempt with many lives. Nikon’s armor had broken dozens of cavalry charges and killed many earthbenders, but each time they had returned.

Chieng had come with a column of the monstrous tank trains that held him in such awe when he had first seen them disembark on the beaches of Gela. Massive blocks of steel and iron powered by engines mightier than the earth, he had been momentarily as terrified of them as no doubt the Earth Kingdom peasants were of his tanks. Only when he learned of the time and energy it took to build and maintain them did he understand why they weren’t themselves the primary offensive weapon of the new army.

She had spoken harshly upon seeing him in the main square of Cam’ron the day before. This in itself was nothing new. The difference this time was that the truth of her words hurt as badly as those of Xian’s.

Amidst the heat and blood drenched insanity of battle, the memory of his encounter with the blunt engineer flashed across his mind with startling clarity. What had once been a beautiful, if simple, fountain plaza had been turned into a junk yard of mangled, smoking tanks and equipment. The dead and dying lined the square under the awnings of buildings where carts full of produce had been only a week before. The smell of the battlefield was pleasant in comparison, since there at least the wind and the dust covered up the smell of the mutilated carcasses and the heaps of burnt machinery. One side of the plaza was completely blocked with parked and partially unloaded tank trains.

Nikon had dismounted from his tank which had lost both treads to earthbending attacks and approached her. He was filthy, his face weary and heavily lined with cares.

“Did you see Prince Iroh, Chieng?” he had begun without preamble, “What have you heard about Nomura? Is he alive?”

Chieng had turned from where she was supervising several men welding plate armor and looked at him in stony silence.

“He seemed well enough to me when I last saw him, Commander,” she finally replied, surveying him coldly, “which is more than I can say for you.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” he’d replied in uncharacteristic anger, “I’m alive!”

Instead of immediately replying she signaled for two of her black clad technicians to come over. Ignoring Nikon she instructed them to install new treads on the young commoner’s tank. Behind
them he saw half a dozen intact machines lined up for refueling.

Finally she turned to him and remarked, “That’s not what your eyes and your face tell me. The shadow of death hangs over you for what you’ve done here. Pride, rather out of place for a commoner, has lead directly to this disaster. Forget about Iroh, get back in your tank and deal with the situation you’ve created, you jackass.”

She turned and left without waiting for a response, but in truth none was forthcoming. He had been struck dumb. He opened his mouth to scream with the helpless rage he felt welling up within him, but nothing emerged.

This moment of melancholy was shattered as a noise in front of him refocused his attention on the present. The screams of two Fire Nation soldiers in front of them were cut short as Nikon’s tank ran them over.

Crouching back down into the well he yelled at the driver, “Damn it, Jin! Those were our men! Watch where the hell we’re going for heaven’s sake!” Nikon thundered furiously down at the driver.

“I’m sorry, sir!” came the panicked reply, “I’m trying to keep us moving and…,” his reply was interrupted as the machine bottomed out over a some irregularity in the ground surface, the source of which Nikon did not want to contemplate. Nikon braced himself on the metal railing to prevent himself from falling over into the cockpit as the driver continued, “I think… I think the steering column’s been damaged! I can’t…”

Jin was interrupted by the left hand gunner who, transfixed by something outside, exclaimed, “Commander, look!”

Nikon emerged again from the hatch and looked left. Several hundred feet away two of his tanks raced eastward along the embankment of a nearby dry creek. Three ostrich horses and their riders bore down on them, but the first was engulfed in flame by a blast from the lead tank and then all three were simply run over.

Confused, Nikon failed to see what the gunner was talking about until a moment later when half a dozen ostrich cavalry swooped in on the lead tank’s right side. Through earthbending they held aloft between them, three riders on each side, a cone shaped rock nearly six feet long and three feet at the base.

Nikon yelled into the severely damaged communication vent, “Left turn sixty degrees! Now! Gunners to forward positions!” Protesting, the left tread sputtered, allowing the tank to turn fitfully to the left as its forward momentum slowed to a crawl.

“Fire!” he screamed as the green clad cavalrymen came into their direct line of sight. Nikon himself breathed deeply and rapid fired half a dozen fire blasts. Beneath him the gunners followed his example and the air itself seemed to explode in flame, but it was too late.

Before the whips of fire could travel the distance between them, Nifong’s men thrust the massive stone dagger into the side of the tank. The cavalrymen pulled quickly away and with a series of simultaneous, identical gestures exploded the stone projectile inside the machine. The upper hatch blew off, allowing a shower of stone shards and a shell of expanding gas and dust to escape. Smoke followed quickly as the tank’s left tread slowed, turning the tank leftward. The machine lurched in slow motion over the embankment and into the dry creek where it exploded with a plume of fire.

The machine behind them then fired on the cavalrymen, who were hit with the blasts from that tank and Nikon’s at once. The Earth Kingdom soldiers and their mounts were engulfed in fire instantly.
Most fell off their ostrich horses and writhed in the dust as they burned alive inside their heavy armor, but two remained in the saddle as their mounts, afire from head to foot, bucked wildly.

The rear tank fired two more blasts, hitting two cavalymen who tried to race by, then swung quickly to avoid the impact of a large stone boulder that fell from the sky. The boulder buried itself in the soft ground, inflicting no damage on the Fire Nation machine.

Nikon looked east and saw another wall of green clad cavalry forming on the ridge where the farmhouse still burned. He ordered his tank to stop and then looked up, calmed his breathing, and shot a plume of blue fire into the sky. Instantly all the Fire Nation tanks still operating in his field of vision turned and began to race toward his position. Another bloody charge was about to begin.

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Long after midnight Nikon and his column passed victorious once more through the gates of Cam’ron. Unlike the triumphal entry a week ago, this time his men were filthy, tired and demoralized. Most of his machines had survived, but they too looked haggard and beaten. The battle had finally ended when the moon had set, leaving the landscape in total darkness save for the art of the firebenders. The enemy, finally exhausted, quit the battlefield.

Upon gaining the fountain plaza, Nikon dismounted from his machine. His brigade came pouring in behind him and within minutes the square was drowned in a cacophony of engine noise, squealing metal and the curses and yelling of men. Quickly the machines were parked and preparations were made by all to succumb to the fatigue they all felt.

Nikon scanned the scene, exhausted, but curious. The plaza was alive with lights and activity. Chieng’s technicians were as busy as before, though she herself was nowhere to be seen. A row of red lanterns had been hung at the end of the plaza opposite the parked tank trains. Underneath the lanterns a row of clean, black Fire Nation tanks sat in perfect order. Behind the row of tanks, two enormous fire pots burned on each side of one of the large doorways that led from the largest building on that side of the plaza. Next to each of the fire pots a guard stood watch in front of a pair of open picture windows.

After instructing his men to stand down for the night, he grabbed the nearest technician and asked where the tanks had come from.

The technician looked quickly from side to side before replying quietly, “Daimyo Tien Shin arrived a few hours ago, Commander,” then pointing to the door between the fire pots he continued in a whisper, “and I think he’s waiting for you.”

Nikon closed his eyes as if in pain. Weariness swept over him, but he forced himself to open his eyes and walk towards the door despite his leaden feet. The windows were open on either side of the door, for even at night the summer heat was oppressive. Inside he could hear two voices. A few steps closer and he was able to identify them as Chieng and Tien Shin.

“Not as bad as it could have been,” Chieng responded no doubt in answer to a question Nikon had just missed, “The plate steel held up well.”

“How many confirmed kills?” came the other voice, unmistakably Tien Shin’s, but anxious and strained as he had never heard it before.

The guards saluted stiffly without making eye contact as Nikon approached. He returned the salute, opened the door and walked into the building. The entry hall was wooden and unadorned. Overhead an ancient iron lantern hung from the ceiling, casting a dim light which failed utterly to dispel the
gloom. The objects of his eavesdropping were in the first room on the left which was accessible through an open doorway. He halted for a moment to listen as the voices from within continued.

“No more than thirty,” the engineer replied, “though I haven’t received the final figures.”

“Have you been to the field yourself?”

“Yes.”

“What weaknesses were they able to exploit? Did you examine any of the wrecks?” he asked, his voice maintaining its intensity.

“I only saw three or four close enough to really tell,” Chieng replied in a clinical tone, “but from what I could see most of them suffered from catastrophic failures of the flank or rear armor. Front and top proved impenetrable as predicted.”

“And the treads?” the daimyo prompted.

“Resisted most attacks, but the plate guards made the treads difficult for them to target. The bottom line is that our tanks were generally mobile enough to avoid the overwhelming majority of earthbending attacks,” Chieng paused a moment before continuing with less enthusiasm, “We lost as many as we did because we allowed the enemy to achieve enough local superiority for them to get ten attempts on each tank before we torched them.”

Nikon breathed deeply then turned the corner into the room to see Tien Shin and Chieng standing by the picture window he had seen from outside. Tien Shin stood erect in his uniform, his back to Nikon. Though brighter than the hallway, this chamber had only a few fire pots to light it. Most of the illumination streamed in from the plaza. The pair stood by one of the fire pots, the flames casting weird shadows around their figures as they spoke. The daimyo paused as he considered the engineer’s assessment.

“If we stop here for a few days I can conduct further analysis,” Chieng offered.

Tien Shin shook his head in a decisive gesture, “No, this mess has cost us much of the lead we’d developed in these first two months. We must push eastward again without delay. If Nifong wishes to engage the organized might of the entire Fire Nation forces in this —“

The daimyo stopped speaking as he detected another presence in the room. He turned and faced Nikon, who saluted bitterly.

The heat and noise of the plaza streamed in from the window, but to Nikon it felt as cold and silent as a tomb. Tien Shin regarded his subordinate with dead, dark, unblinking eyes.

“Leave us,” he commanded the engineer without breaking eye contact with Nikon.

Chieng complied silently, leaving through the door Nikon had just used to enter. A trace of sympathy marked her face as she passed the young commoner, but he did not notice. A few moments later she exited the front door and she soon disappeared completely from view into the maze of tanks and equipment in the square.

Finally, Tien Shin approached Iroh’s friend. He stopped a few paces from Nikon and without a word or change in expression slapped him soundly across the face. The blow stung, but Nikon accepted it. Xian and Chieng had already shamed him for his hubris, now he knew he must face his tormentor for the same offense.
“You deserve to be relieved for what you’ve done. You know that, don’t you?” the daimyo began in a low voice.

“Answer me!” he commanded when it became clear Nikon was unable or unwilling to respond.

“Yes, my lord,” Nikon responded in a bitter acknowledgement of the truth, “I do.”

“And if I were in command, not that soft hearted imbecile Xian, you would be, you miserable peasant!” thundered Tien Shin suddenly, his eyes seething with anger.

“Don’t you see what you’ve done here?” Tien Shin asked, his voice breaking, “Let me help you! Not only did you lose almost a quarter of your tanks and hundreds of loyal Fire Nation soldiers who deserved better, but you gave him four whole days to probe for weaknesses in our new weaponry! That’s what you’ve done!”

“Yes, my lord,” countered Nikon stubbornly, “but for all the bad mistakes I’ve made to get us here, we were victorious. All Nifong has to show for his effort is a couple thousand dead earthbenders.”

“So what? How do you know he didn’t learn something worth that sacrifice? He’s been waiting for an opportunity like this – right from the start!”

Tien Shin snorted derisively as Nikon dropped his gaze to the floor.

“Oh, Great Spirits,” the tall man remarked with an edge of frustration in his voice, “I’ll wager Xian never even mentioned this as a consequence, did he? I heard all he talked about was putting his beloved Iroh in danger.”

Nikon, fear surging again within him, raised his head and asked, “Have you any news from Nomura, my lord?”

A sharp smile spread across the daimyo’s face as he replied in the deadly conversational tone to which Nikon was most accustomed, “It seems Prince Iroh has more leadership potential than his cousin. The outcome in Nomura is still in doubt, but he and his men are apparently fighting well.”

“The truth is you are damned lucky,” Tien Shin continued in disgust, “I’d bet a thousand gold that Iroh is going to smash that pocket and that the Fire Lord’s propaganda machine is going to make you a spirits be damned hero for this tactical disaster.”

The smile disappeared completely from Tien Shin’s face as he pointed an accusatory finger at Nikon, “And for what reason, exactly, did you put us all in jeopardy?” He paused, waiting for a reply he knew would not come, “So you could beat me to Cam’ron?” he supplied with mock incredulity.

“Petty, costly, unforgivably stupid,” he spat, and then concluded in a tone of utter disdain, “and exactly what everyone expected from a low life piece of gutter trash like you.”

Tien Shin stepped forward and put his face right up to Nikon’s and with his deadly smile returning once more, spoke in a low, threatening voice, “If you make another “mistake” like this again, Orlando, I will have you arrested and executed. Neither Xian nor Iroh will be able to protect you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my lord. I understand.”

“Excellent, Commander. I advise you to learn from your mistakes and pray for General Xian’s health. If either fails your life won’t be worth more than the time it will take me to find you. Dismissed.”
Nikon, numb from exhaustion and shame, left the building as the first streaks of sunlight stained the eastern sky.
The Killing Fields

Chapter Summary

The Earth Kingdom general surveys the battlefield of Cam’ron trying to discover a weakness in the Fire Nation’s terrifying new weaponry...

The sun had sunk low in the west as two riders approached the deserted battlefield. A light, hot breeze ruffled the riders’ hair and brought to their noses the faintest scent of scorched earth. Both men wore cloaks of grey and rode ostrich horses with simple saddle and bridle. An observer might easily have thought them merely a pair of weary travelers wandering a lonely, broken land, but they were not.

The taller of the two riders looked up momentarily to mark the solitary wall of a building, blackened by fire, that jutted up to the sky a mile or two away. “We’re close”, he thought silently. Similar signs of ferocious combat had marked their travel now for many miles.

After a few minutes they mounted a low hill. At its crest they were finally able to look down onto the killing fields of Cam’ron. The tall man scanned the scene and drew a sharp intake of breath at what he saw. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of what could only be grave markers littered the wide, flat expanse before them. Scattered amongst these markers lay the twisted remains of a dozen or so of Chieng’s mighty war machines. The failing sunlight struck the ominous metal carcasses at an angle, casting weird shadows across the wasted landscape.

The wind whispered a moment longer before the shorter man spoke in an uneasy voice, “Feels haunted, General.”

Nifong exhaled slowly and replied, “It is. We should leave before nightfall.”

They lingered a moment longer before the taller man nudged his mount forward, his aide following behind. Soon they began to pass grave markers on either side. These were short, iron spikes that stuck in the ground at oddly spaced intervals. On many of them hung dented or smashed Fire Nation helmets.

After some time they came upon three ruined tanks in relatively close proximity. Nifong stopped and dismounted. One of the tanks had been flipped over, its belly cracked wide open by the impact of a large boulder. Another had apparently fallen into a nearby dry creek and exploded, leaving nothing but its treads and flooring intact. Somewhat farther away another looked simply asleep, missing nothing but its treads. Nifong wandered closer and saw that its front wheels had sunk into a pair of deep holes cut out of the living earth.

“Do you see it, Captain?” inquired the general as the younger man dismounted and joined him at the cluster of metal tombs.

“See what, sir?” the younger man replied as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Nifong did not reply immediately, instead focusing his gaze on the other wrecks around them one after another. His aide, much accustomed to his superior’s frequent reticence, reached out and touched the tank closest to him. Running his hand along its side he felt the smooth, metal surface,
cool even in the heat of high summer.

Suddenly, the older man turned and announced, “Come, we must return. I’ve seen what I needed to see here.”

“What did you see that wasn’t in the reports, sir?”

“How we will win, Captain,” he replied softly, “How we will win.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad then, lord,” the younger man replied with a small nod of his head in satisfaction, “I was afraid…”

“Of what?” Nifong prompted after a few moments delay.

“…that our men had died for nothing,” the aide finished uncertainly.

“That still depends on what we do,” the taller man replied, “and what our enemy does.”

“What’s going to happen, General?”

Nifong paused to consider before answering in a brisk tone, “We will prepare for Xian the opportunity he has been praying for.”

“A trap? Won’t he be expecting something like that?”

“Yes, but, against his nature, he will take the risk. The shadow of his uncle looms long over him, and longer still the shadow of his father now long since passed.”

“How do you know this, sir? Madame Wu?”

The general locked eyes briefly with his subordinate, nodded, and then looking away once again remarked, “Yes. I have my opponent at a disadvantage,” suddenly Nifong laughed bitterly, “Not so honorable, is it, my friend? I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“You’ve never disappointed anyone, my lord,” replied the aide without hesitation.

“You’re too loyal, Captain,” Nifong replied with a mixture of bitterness and affection, “I’ve done deeds that would brand me a criminal in a different time and place. I don’t see how my rank or my nation’s blessing makes those deeds any less blameworthy. I wonder how the Spirit of the Earth can stand by someone who is capable of raping the mind of his enemy and sending him to his death without a trace of mercy or compassion.”

The younger man looked down, uncertain whether to reply. His brow creased before he looked up, his decision made.

“May I speak, sir?”

Nifong, who had looked back at the nearest tank, turned to look again on his companion, for though his aide had been with him many years now, such a request was rare.

“Of course,” he said in surprise.

“You’re so hard on yourself, General, and I just don’t understand,” he began, genuinely confused, “I
know you feel responsible for every one who dies, even amongst the enemy, but you didn’t ask for this war, none of us did. You speak of fairness and justice in war when there is none. Why do you insist on beating yourself bloody over doing only what you must? What purpose does it serve?”

The aging general sighed and answered, “It helps to remind me that power comes at the cost of total responsibility, Captain. The soldiers’ job is to do what I tell them to do or to die trying. My job is to win without making my men sacrifice their lives, but now it seems that even when I succeed in this as a military leader, I fail as a human being. My only choice is whether to litter the field with corpses clothed in red or green. Either way, I leave behind a legacy of ruined lives and cemeteries.”

“That choice makes a great difference to us, general. Why should you lament an unfair fight when a fair fight means that many of us, your own people, would lie dead instead of the enemy? Isn’t your function to ensure that the odds are in our favor before we ever lift a stone?”

The question hung in the air as the sun began to dip below the horizon. Twilight was upon them.

Finally Nifong replied, slowly nodding his head in glum affirmation, “You speak the truth, Captain, and that is why I will never hesitate in my duty or waver in pursuit of victory for our people. I pray only that the Spirits forgive me for what I’ve done, and for the sake of the innocents we protect, help to deliver us from the tyranny of Azulon.”

Wind whistled through the helmets hung on the grave markers as they mounted their ostrich horses and prepared to depart.

“We must get word to the Council of Five as soon as may be, for I know now what we must do, and where. We will need our allies from the north and the Earth King’s most powerful earthbenders to crush this invasion, but crush it we will.”

“I’ll not be sorry to leave this place, my lord,” remarked the aide uneasily as he surveyed the rapidly darkening graveyard.

“Neither will I,” the general replied before pushing his ostrich horse into a gallop.

Soon they were gone, leaving the wind and the shadows the only companions of the fallen.
Chapter Summary

It is now late summer and the Fire Nation war machine seems unstoppable. The Nasu Plain has fallen, the passes across the Ping Tou Mountains have been taken, and now the vanguard of the Army of the Granite Mountains stands on the very shores of Lake Myojin. A key piece of intelligence falls into Fire Nation hands that allows them to plan the final destruction of General Nifong and his Army of the Granite Mountains... but not everything is as it seems.

Chapter XVI – Alia Iacta Est (The Die is Cast)

Nikon dug his heels into the sides of his mongoose dragon, urging it forward. He was late, a rare and uncomfortable circumstance for him. Punctuality was a distinct virtue in a society where the smallest insult, whether real or perceived, often resulted in the dreaded agni kai. As a commoner, before he was taken as a student by the illustrious Master Chen, Nikon would not even have been afforded the opportunity to defend himself in such a duel. He would simply have been maimed or executed.

Pushing these thoughts from his mind, he instead focused on the journey. The Nasu plain flashed before him as he and a pair of guards tore across the countryside. Sweat poured down his brow, for though the Summer Solstice had passed more than a month ago, the late afternoon still sweltered in this region of the world. He experienced a brief moment of regret as he realized that, no more than a few weeks ago, this land was covered in a sea of grain. Now it was a wasteland of ash and dust scoured mercilessly by the wind.

Cresting a low ridge, the great fortress city of Nanjing rose in the distance before them. Its fortifications, obviously of great age and in poor condition, were broken badly in a dozen places. Thick, black smoke rose in never ending columns that threatened to blot out the sky. The mongoose dragons closed the gap between them and the fallen enemy stronghold at amazing speed. Soon the Fire Nation flags draped over the lengths of wall still intact became visible.

Iroh’s friend looked to his left and saw the remains of the ancient monorail system that had once connected this mighty provincial capital to the rest of the continent. The railway stretched to the north almost as far as the eye could see before turning east along a river that was but a glimmer in the distance. Supported by elegant stone arches, the structure looked as if it had been there since the beginning of time and would be there beyond its end. The architectural perfection of the railway was ruined, however, by its abrupt termination some distance from the city. The intervening expanse was littered with the crumbled remains of this final tract.

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The structure captured the young commoner’s imagination, and he was reminded briefly of the book Iroh had read during the crossing. He caught himself wondering sadly whether Tien Shin had wrecked this beautiful monument, one of the last, proud vestiges of the ancient world. He dismissed
this idea, however, as he got close enough to see the vegetation growing over the stones of the fallen railway. The monorail, whether through decay or as a result of some war that had now long since faded from memory, had obviously collapsed hundreds of years before Tien Shin had arrived to destroy it.

Visions of buildings that touched the sky and underground dams vanished as soon as he saw the bright red tents of Tien Shin’s headquarters just outside the city. He had not seen his commanding officer for over a month since his humiliation at Cam'ron, and he was glad of it. Despite Tien Shin’s severe warning about the enemy’s search for a weakness in their new technology, they had witnessed no change in the enemy’s strategy since then. The defenders, outgunned and outmaneuvered, but not outfought, continued to fall back, burning everything they could not take with them. Those encircled by the Fire Nation’s rapid advance fought to the death.

Nikon felt again the twinge of unease at Tien Shin’s concern. The daimyo had been angry beyond reason, yes, and clearly regarded him with dull hatred and contempt, but the fear in his eyes when he spoke of Nifong had been palpable. He had never seen Tien Shin show fear before that night.

As the cluster of richly decorated Fire Nation tents drew close, the brigade leader saw another small party of mongoose riders arrive from the west and stop in front of the largest tent. As they dismounted Nikon could see that the leader of the other party was none other than Prince Iroh. Suddenly the demons of doubt and indecision that had plagued him the whole journey vanished. The Crown Prince, turning to identify the newcomers as he took off his helmet, smiled broadly and spread his arms wide in a gesture of welcome.

“Your Highness!” exclaimed Nikon, emotion threatening to overwhelm him, “You’re alive!”

The commoner embraced the Crown Prince, who smiled and replied, “It is good to see you too, my friend. I feared the worst when Chieng told me of Nifong’s attack against Cam’ron.”

They released each other, and unable to restrain himself, Nikon rejoined with a mischievous grin, “You helped me out there, Your Highness. As soon as the enemy heard you were sending her over,” he said, using the palm of one hand to slap the other and making a take off motion, “they took off like a wolf bat out of hell!”

“Oh, I’m sure of it!” Iroh replied laughing, then, checking quickly from side to side to make sure the foul mouthed engineer wasn’t eavesdropping, “My only question is how you stopped your own men from running away too!”

They laughed for a moment before the smile faded from the young tank commander’s face.

“I know I let you down,” he confessed solemnly, “I let us all down. I lost face in front of Tien Shin, and I know that reflects on you, Your Highness. I’m sorry and I beg your forgiveness.”

“Haha! You didn’t let me down!” Iroh corrected, “I should thank you for giving me the opportunity to win such a victory for my father. I received a letter from him congratulating me on Nomura not a week ago, “a glorious success” he called it!”

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“Haha! You didn’t let me down!” Iroh corrected, “I should thank you for giving me the opportunity to win such a victory for my father. I received a letter from him congratulating me on Nomura not a week ago, “a glorious success” he called it!”

“They released each other, and unable to restrain himself, Nikon rejoined with a mischievous grin, “You helped me out there, Your Highness. As soon as the enemy heard you were sending her over,” he said, using the palm of one hand to slap the other and making a take off motion, “they took off like a wolf bat out of hell!”

“Oh, I’m sure of it!” Iroh replied laughing, then, checking quickly from side to side to make sure the foul mouthed engineer wasn’t eavesdropping, “My only question is how you stopped your own men from running away too!”
us on our victories!”

Nikon blew out a breath and smiled ruefully, “Yeh, that’s worth something I guess,” then, a look of apprehension clouding his face, “Did… the Fire Lord say anything about… Cam’ron?”

Iroh’s grin broke in a wide smile as he replied, “Yes, he did, as a matter of fact,” but declined to continue. Instead, Iroh’s grin expanded to extend nearly from ear to ear.

“Well?” his friend pleaded, “Please, Your Highness, don’t torture the low born, we aren’t built for it!”

“Ha! Nonsense, anyone who can, quote, “hand Nifong his first defeat in a decade is a servant of special talent and ability”, end quote.”

“Sweet Agni! Did he really say that?”

“Oh yes, I will show you the letter later,” chuckling, Iroh continued, “and here you told Xian you weren’t a warrior – shows what you know about yourself, my friend! Anyway, we can talk more about it after the council, but now we must attend to my cousin and our beloved daimyo.”

Turning serious again, and checking to make sure none could overhear the familiarity, Nikon warned, “Iroh, I am concerned about your cousin. When I saw him last he’d lost a lot of weight and looked very ill. I tried to find out what was wrong, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

Iroh’s smile dampened, but he brushed off the warning saying, “Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine. Wouldn’t we have heard something by now if he were really sick? Besides, Xian worries for everyone and everything. He lets it wear on him more than he should,” then, his smile returning, “We’ll just have to cheer him up, maybe with one of those nice, hot cups of tea he is always recommending to us.”

They entered the tent, returning the salutes of the sentinels as they passed. Inside they saw a nearly perfect duplicate of General Xian’s headquarters. The center of the tent was occupied by a high rectangular table. Iroh and Nikon were indeed the last to arrive. The room was full of people, including Gan, Chieng Shiung, Tien Shin, and General Xian. The rest Iroh recognized as Tien Shin’s other brigade commanders.

Xian and Tien Shin stood with many of the others around the table, poring over the map. Iroh was startled when he realized one of the sentinels had followed him and Nikon into the tent and announced their names in a formal tone. Everyone turned to the newcomers, but Iroh focused on his cousin. His heart sinking in his chest, he saw instantly that Nikon had been right. Xian looked exhausted, frail, as if he had aged a lifetime since that night the Fire Lord had given him the task of defeating Nifong. No, not just frail, defeated. The relaxed, fatherly disposition that Iroh had loved since he was a boy was gone, replaced by a stony countenance that betrayed a life without hope. Iroh heard Nikon draw in a quick breath as he too looked upon their commanding general.

“Oh cousin, what has happened to you?” Iroh quailed in his mind, “I don’t understand, we are winning, yet you look as if we have already lost! What is happening to you?” Iroh surveyed the room quickly, noting Tien Shin’s sour look and concluded, “No time to find out now.”

Iroh and his friend saluted their general and Tien Shin. Xian returned the salute, Tien Shin did not.

“Welcome, Prince Iroh,” Xian said, his voice stronger than his frail frame seemed to allow, “and you, Commander Orlando. Congratulations to you both on your victories. The Fire Lord has written that, despite whatever mistakes we have made,” Xian paused briefly here to make eye contact with
Nikon, “he is pleased with the success of our campaign and has developed a favorable impression of your performances.”

With the ghost of a smile, Xian gestured for Tien Shin to contribute.

“Yes, justified or not,” the daimyo said through obviously gritted teeth, “the Fire Lord has bid us congratulate you, Prince Iroh, on your successful liquidation of the Nomura pocket, and…,” Tien Shin’s dark brown eyes flashed with bitter hate as he focused on Nikon, “you on your… “victory” at Cam’ron.”

Nikon saluted once again and, unable to suppress the hint of a smile, replied, “Thank you, my lord… I hope I have made you proud.”

Tien Shin’s fist tightened over the grip of one of the war fans he wore in his sash.

After allowing a few moments for the tension to continue, during which many in the room began to exchange uneasy looks, Xian began anew.

“Now that everyone is present,” he began sternly, “we must turn to the reason I have summoned you. We are here to make a decision, and while the final judgment is mine alone to make, I would hear what each of you would counsel before I choose our course.”

Xian instructed the group to gather around the table which was covered in a huge map. Iroh surveyed the map, much larger than any available at his headquarters. This was one of the massive campaign maps that only Xian and Tien Shin’s entourages carried. His eyes swept over the enormous chart and recognized the eastern portion of the Nasu plain, the western third of Lake Myojin and the wide spine of the mighty Ping Tou mountains which separated them. To the south he spied the upper reaches of the Dune Sea and the lifeless salt lakes that populated it.

“First, the facts,” Xian announced when they had taken their positions around the table. The ailing general produced a thin scroll, and handing the missive to the young commoner, asked softly, “Nikon, would you please read this aloud.”

Nikon opened the scroll, cleared his throat and began.

“From the loyal Commander Ryu, 2nd Armored Division, to the noble Tien Shin, Daimyo of the Army of the Great Divide, I send greetings.

My lord, it has been three days since, after meeting token resistance at Highpass Hold, we captured the Meiji Pass and penetrated to the far side of the Ping Tou Mountains. I am pleased to report that after following the Jade Highway for almost five hundred leagues we have finally come to its termination where it joins with the Coast Road. Here, at long last, we caught our first glimpse of the western shore of mighty Lake Myojin. I tell you truly, lord, Lake Myojin is a wonder to behold. If I did not know better, I would swear this was the Eastern Ocean itself.

As planned, we have pivoted southward upon gaining the Coast Road. We briefly occupied two nameless seaside villages, but finding no inhabitants and nothing of value, at once proceeded further south. Yesterday our scouts came within view of our strategic objective for this stage of the campaign, the port city of Amiganza.

Approaching the city from the northwest the scouts found the city overrun with refugees. Both the Coast Road from the south and the road heading west to the southern passes of the Ping Tou Mountains were choked with a living river of men, women, children, wounded soldiers and every conceivable form of transport. All appear to be heading for the harbor in the hopes of obtaining
passage to the eastern shore, presumably in an effort to gain the imagined safety of Ba Sing Se.

The road from the north was devoid of refugees, however, and given our experience in the two villages we briefly occupied, we believe that most of the population along the north shore has been evacuated. It seems from this that the enemy has received advance notice of our arrival and acted accordingly. This morning our belief in this matter was confirmed by an event of such importance that I felt immediate communication was necessary.

Last night we sent scouts around the city to try and survey the situation to the south. During the night one of the scouting parties encountered and killed an Earth Kingdom soldier bearing a message scroll from Wu Ti, General Nifong’s Chief of Staff, to the Governor of Amiganza Province. I send you this captured communication for your inspection along with this report. I note that the enemy’s intelligence is far better than we supposed since his assessment of our supply situation is basically accurate.

Yours in obedience,
Ryu

“Now this one,” commanded Xian, handing Nikon a larger green scroll. The scroll’s spine was adorned with a wooden cap on each end that bore the symbol of the Earth Kingdom. It was tied with a dark green ribbon. Nikon carefully untied the ribbon, opened the scroll, and began to read.

“I’m afraid the answer to your request, my Lord Governor, is still no. General Nifong is not impressed with your insults or your petty threats. He has bid me to encourage you to go ahead and report this “outrage” to the Earth King for all the good it will do you, and while he is impressed that a member of the Council of Five would ever leave the comfort of Ba Sing Se to see the real war, he would like to point out that General Xu has no more authority over him than you do.

As for the facts of the situation, we are well aware of Ryu’s activities to the north. This is not important, however, since our intelligence indicates he has not been supplied in over 10 days. Without additional fuel his ability to threaten either Amiganza or our rear is low. Now that Daimyo Tien Shin has secured the bridgeheads across the Yoshi River, we are certain that the enemy’s main thrust will be through the southern passes, and it is there we must concentrate our forces.

Sending troops to Amiganza would be a waste we cannot afford. You and General Xu do not need anymore bodyguards. If you are that afraid, get on the next boat to Ba Sing Se.

Wu Ti

Nikon’s voice rose an octave in an expression of surprise as he finished reading the message. He lowered the scroll, his eyes wide in shock, and whistled loudly in spite of himself.

“Yes,” remarked Xian as he nodded absent mindedly, “you’re not kidding, my friend.”

Gan, standing to Nikon’s right, motioned for his friend to hand over the scroll.

“All right,” asked Gan as he examined the paper closely, “I know what it says, but what does it mean?”
“That, dear colleagues,” intoned Xian in a tired voice, “is the question we are here to answer.”

The tent flaps rustled in the wind as silence descended on the group. Some exchanged worried glances.

Finally Chieng spoke, raising one hand in a slightly flippan gesturc, “So? What’s there to debate about? We send the armor and cavalry through the Meiji Pass and catch Nifong with his pants down from the rear. With Prince Iroh’s infantry blocking their escape to the west they’d have no chance.”

Gan put the scroll down on the table and observed in a controlled voice, “That’s one interpretation. The obvious one.”

“Again,” Xian cut in, “that is the question we must consider. The message contains enough, barely enough, information to make a decision, but only if we believe it to be genuine. Is it real? Or is it a deception?”

Bristling, the engineer retorted, “I think Gan, as usual, overanalyzes. If it looks like a turtle duck and quacks like a turtle duck, then it is, in fact, a turtle duck,” her golden eyes narrowing dangerously she addressed Gan, “You believe it’s a fake. Why?”

“I think it may be fake. I don’t know for sure,” the Qu’ai Tau replied cautiously.

“So, the answer to my question is you have no evidence that it is fake?”

Annoyed, Gan replied hotly, “Of course I don’t have evidence that it’s fake, what the hell do you expect? Instant forensic analysis? Perhaps a bit of soothsaying?”

“Then your conclusion is baseless,” she stated coldly.

Tien Shin laughed with quiet malice and said, “You have the makings of a good state prosecutor, Chieng, but the possibility of deceit must be considered.”

One of the brigade commanders who Iroh recognized by sight, but not by name, picked up the scroll, read it quickly and commented, “Well, it’s interesting to note that the tone is hardly complimentary of anyone. Also, the letter’s undated and contains no greeting or preamble at all.”

“I agree,” Xian injected thoughtfully, “the letter seems genuine if only because it paints no one in a flattering light. Wu Ti comes across as an arrogant ass, the Governor as a whining incompetent, and Nifong as confident enough of his position to feel comfortable insulting a member of the Council of Five.”

“Also,” Iroh commented, echoing Xian’s thoughtful tone, “As Ryu pointed out, they did reveal a key piece of intelligence we know to be accurate. Ryu cannot advance without receiving additional supplies,” then, turning to address Xian directly, “If this is a deception, General, it is an exceptional one.”

Xian locked eyes with his cousin and replied, “Would you expect anything less from Nifong?”

The question hung in the air, silent and deadly. No one was in doubt of the answer.

Breaking the silence, Gan queried, “Even if it is genuine, how do we know Nifong had anything to do with it? Who is this Wu Ti? He claims that Nifong instructed him to respond in this manner, but his claim isn’t proof.”

“No, it isn’t,” Xian agreed, “and all we know of Wu Ti is that he is, in fact, Nifong’s Chief of Staff,
or was six months ago when I was last briefed on the subject.”

“How often does a member of the Council of Five leave Ba Sing Se?” asked Commander Tojo, one of Tien Shin’s brigade leaders, “I don’t remember that ever happening before.”

“It’s rare, but it does happen,” answered Xian, “General Shu and I defeated one of the Council members on my first campaign.”

“More to the point,” Tien Shin interrupted in an undertone of annoyance, “The message reveals discord and conflict amongst the enemy, which is very credible given Nifong’s infamously shaky relations with Ba Sing Se.”

“Only if it’s genuine,” Xian replied.

“Yes,” Tien Shin agreed, eyeing his commander, “if it’s genuine, though I agree with Chieng, I see no reason to believe the message false other than it is, indeed, quite convenient.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“It does, but I see no excuse for inaction.”

“You seem to have made up your mind.”

“I have,” Tien Shin replied softly, but firmly after a slight pause.

“Why?”

“Think carefully, General,” the daimyo replied in that measured and calculating tone that Iroh feared most, “What realistic choice do we have? What is our alternative? We have overlooked perhaps the most important fact revealed in this letter. Whether it is a fake or not, Nifong clearly knows what our current plan is. He expects me to attack through the southern passes, just as we planned. So, what other options do we have besides using the northern pass? I see two.”

Tien Shin pointed to the desert region on the map and said, “One, march through the eastern expanse of the Dune Sea and round the Ping Tou at their termination far to the east of Mequon, and two, end the campaign now and consolidate our gains by pulling back and fortifying the Nasu.”

“Neither is practical,” he concluded with absolute confidence, “The former is suicide unless we magically develop the ability to drink salt water and can somehow instantly manufacture a dozen more tank trains to service the unbelievably long supply lines we’d create in the process. The latter would be in direct violation of the Fire Lord’s order.”

Xian sighed, cocked his head to one side and shifted his gaze to his cousin.

“Prince Iroh, what say you?”

Shocked to hear himself say the words, Iroh replied, “I agree with the daimyo. We can’t go forward the way we planned, we can’t go around, and we can’t stay where we are.”

“Unfortunately,” Iroh continued, pointing to the rabbit’s warren of trails that constituted the southern passes, “Even if the letter is genuine, the opportunity presented does not guarantee a swift, easy victory. Even if we succeed in engaging them unprepared from the rear and my infantry blocks the western end of the pass, we will still be fighting in what amounts to an enormous rock canyon. Hardly the most favorable ground. However, if we succeed in trapping Nifong there the probability of destroying him is high, even if our own losses are heavy.”
“On the other hand,” equivocated the Crown Prince, pointing now at the western shore of Lake Myojin, “if it is a trap, the lake shore is the only place for them to counterattack. The land there is relatively flat for thirty leagues before you get to the foot hills of the Ping Tou, so they’d be attacking us on very favorable ground. We’ve still got enough time left in the dry season for us to execute the whole operation with time to spare so we shouldn’t have to worry about mud.”

“Even if it is a trap, who cares?” Chieng asked in an exasperated tone, “They’ve failed to stop us so far and they’ve thrown everything they have at us. This is just the opportunity we’ve been waiting for, so let’s not waste it.”

“I don’t know about that,” Iroh objected gently, “Nifong’s counterattack at Cam’ron was a failure in part because he did not commit the bulk of his forces to it.”

“So what?” the engineer retorted with a curt gesture of dismissal, “The fact remains that he engaged our armor and lost – badly, and if he learned anything from the failure we sure haven’t seen it.”

Iroh shrugged his shoulders and declined to rebut the argument. After a few moments of silence, Xian turned to Nikon, who had not yet spoken.

“Nikon?”

The young commoner looked quickly over at Iroh, who regarded him with an encouraging smile, then to Tien Shin, who did not.

“Well?” Tien Shin prodded coldly when Nikon did not answer immediately.

Addressing Xian, the young tank commander replied in a slow and deliberate voice, “Cam’ron taught me the value of caution, General, and the daimyo has impressed upon me many times and in many different ways the value of information and the power of deception,” he hesitated a moment and stole another glance at Iroh before concluding, “I agree with Gan. I believe the message is false and that this is a trap, but I have nothing more than my intuition to support it.”

Chieng made a sound of disgust, while Xian nodded solemnly and said, “Thank you, Commander.”

“We have asked the question whether we believe this captured message to be genuine or not,” Tien Shin retorted indirectly, “but I submit that this question has no practical value. As Chieng pointed out, we have no reason to believe it is not genuine, and therefore we have no choice, General, but to act upon it,” Tien Shin concluded with the cold, deadly finality of a jail cell slamming shut, “If you fail to act, the Fire Lord will hold you accountable for allowing such an opportunity to pass.”

Xian turned reluctantly to meet his subordinate’s eyes, read the implicit threat that lay there, and accepted his fate.

“The die is cast then,” the exhausted General concluded heavily, “We will attack. Tien Shin, prepare the mobile forces for immediate departure. We make for the Meiji Pass.”
Chapter Summary

Iroh and Nikon say farewell as the mobile forces prepare to depart for the Meiji Pass.

It was long after midnight and Iroh stood alone outside his tent. He looked up with little joy at the waxing moon and then at the camp before him bathed in its pale light. The area immediately in front of the tent was littered with dozens of crates. Some of these were open and contained armor, weapons and other supplies. Others were closed. Chieng’s tank train had been loaded with hundreds of these containers before heading northeast only a few hours after the council had concluded. The landscape beyond the camp was still and silent.

After Chieng had gone, the preparations for the departure of Tien Shin’s army seemed to Iroh to have created more noise than the fiercest combat at the height of the battle of the Arno, an event which now seemed strangely distant to the Crown Prince. That time of clarity, confidence and hope had now receded into a glooming twilight of uncertainty and dread. Iroh had felt reasonably confident that they were proceeding on the right course when the council had ended, but now he felt uneasy. The doubts expressed so well by his friends echoed stubbornly in his mind.

The sound of footsteps alerted him that he was no longer alone. Turning quickly he was unsurprised to see Nikon, still in his armor and with his helmet tucked under his right arm.

“Up so late, my friend?” Iroh asked, forcing a smile.

Nikon replied, his expression bleak, “I should ask the same of you, Your Highness. But I don’t need to ask why you’re awake. No amount of tea will make our problems go away, will it?”

Iroh laughed with some bitterness and replied, “No, even my cousin would have to admit that.”

The young commoner put his helmet down gently on a nearby crate and continued, “It’s a few hours until dawn. Then I must head to the Meiji,” he paused, looked away as if embarrassed, then looked back at his friend and concluded, “I wanted to take my leave of you while it was still quiet enough… to say goodbye.”

Iroh’s chest tightened as he replied more sternly than he intended, “We’re not saying goodbye.”

The wind sighed among the tents as Nikon stood before him.

“It’s a trap, Iroh… and Tien Shin knows it.”

“Then why, why did he support the attack?” asked Iroh, his hands spread wide in a sudden, visceral expression of the frustration that had been building inside him.

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t make any sense! If it’s a trap, what advantage is there in it for him?”

“None that I can see,” Nikon admitted with a sigh.
“He’s going to be right there, for heaven’s sake! If it’s a trap, he’s going to be trapped too. It doesn’t make any sense,” Iroh insisted, “My step brother is anything but stupid. He would not participate if he believed it to be a suicide mission.”

“But you’re still out here thinking about it, aren’t you?” the young tank commander countered, “If you were still convinced this was a good idea you’d be in there,” he said, pointing his thumb back over his shoulder at the tent behind them, “sleeping like a baby.”

“I’m confused,” Iroh admitted in turn, “it felt like Tien Shin bullied my cousin into this course of action for some reason I don’t understand, but by the same token I don’t think I’d have chosen differently if I were in Xian’s position.”

“It’s killing him, Iroh,” said Nikon, lowering his voice, “Xian, I mean. You see that, don’t you?”

Iroh winced visibly at the statement of this simple truth.

“Yes, I know that now,” Iroh admitted after a pause. The shock of seeing his cousin so changed at the council had not yet worn off.

“Is he sick, do you think?”

“No, I don’t think so, not his body anyway,” answered Iroh after a short pause to consider, “He wouldn’t let me see him after the meeting, but… I think it’s the uncertainty. The stress of the uncertainty is eating him alive. My cousin worries about everything and everyone. He’s been that way my whole life, and everyone has loved him for it, even my father.”

“What about your brother?” Nikon ventured hesitantly, for he was terrified of Prince Ozai, and it was rare that Iroh spoke of him.

Iroh smiled and replied, “Yes, even my brother, in his own way.”

“Wow!” the young commoner offered involuntarily, “Then your cousin is too good for his own good, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He told me as much before we left.”

Nikon’s eyebrows rose in surprise, “What?”

Briefly Iroh recounted Xian’s suspicions surrounding the Fire Lord’s motives for appointing him to lead the new army.

“I didn’t believe him. I didn’t want to believe him,” the young Prince said heavily, “Xian has been a pillar of strength and wisdom for me as long as I’ve known him, but…” Iroh hesitated as he struggled to continue. He did not like criticizing his cousin. It felt like a betrayal. Forcing himself to go on despite the discomfort he concluded, “…maybe he was right to say he was not the best man to lead this campaign. He is wiser than I, but… he is governed by his fears.”

Iroh paused and looked down at the broken ground before him, uncertain whether to mention Xian’s final comment during their conversation from so long ago.

“And?” his friend asked, cocking his head to one side in response to his friend’s hesitation.

“Well, he also told me he was having nightmares… dark premonitions… things like that.”

“You don’t believe in any of that stuff, do you?” Nikon returned with some surprise, “You
remember that Gan made my life hell for spouting that “gutter trash superstition” when we first met. I thought the nobility looked down on all the hocus pocus of the underclass.”

“I don’t, or I didn’t, now I don’t really know what to believe. The world seems a bit wider now than it used to. Besides, it doesn’t matter what I believe, it only matters what my cousin believes.”

“Did he say what his dreams were about?”

“No, but I know he’s been dreading a conundrum like we now face for months. It’s probably been gnawing at him since before we even left home. He’s had to make a very hard decision and the risk he is taking is very large.”

“Will he break do you think?” Nikon asked, his eyes widening with fear.

Iroh considered this and replied, “No.”

Finding no comfort in Iroh’s stubborn expression of confidence, Nikon shook his head in exasperation, “I just don’t get it. What the hell’s happened to us? How did we go from certain victory to this… this mess?”

“I don’t know, my friend. The more successful we’ve become, the more the uncertainty has seemed to increase. It doesn’t make sense, but it is nonetheless true.”

Nikon crossed his arms, sighed in frustration, and then, changing the subject asked, “Were you mad at me for disagreeing with you at the council, by the way?”

Iroh laughed and replied, “No, of course not. I was more afraid you and Gan would be mad at me for agreeing with Tien Shin,” then, in a more serious tone, “I value your opinion, and I would no more stop you from using your head than I would Gan. You both have an agility of mind that I admire.”

Nikon smiled weakly and replied, “Thanks. Guess I need to stop and think more often instead of spending all my time chasing after hookers and trying to humiliate the daimyo, right?”

“I don’t blame anyone for trying to humiliate my step brother,” the Crown Prince replied with a wry smile, “but we could all do with some more wisdom and patience. I know I could.”

Iroh leaned back against the crate behind him and, reading his friends troubled features, asked, “Are you afraid?”

“Yes, yes, I am,” Nikon confessed with a single nod of his head, “At the Arno and Cam’ron I didn’t have time to be afraid. I just collapsed in a puddle afterwards as soon as I was alone. This time though… it seems I’ve got all the time in the world.”

“We’re all afraid,” Iroh injected, “Even Tien Shin.”

“When the time comes, though, it won’t matter,” continued Nikon quietly, ignoring Iroh’s comment, “just as it didn’t matter in any of the battles I’ve fought until now. When the fighting starts, the world narrows… and everything else except the fighting just… goes away. I always wanted an education – never thought I’d get one like this.”

The young commoner began to rub his arms as if he were cold and looked suddenly away.

“And…?” Iroh finally prompted, “Your turn, my friend.”

Nikon nodded his head a few times and finally replied in a tone of quiet desperation, “It’s selfish, I
know, but I wish Master Chen were here. He always knew what to do, but… he’s probably been dead for months now, hasn’t he?”

Although phrased as a question, there was no doubt as to the young commoner’s belief in the answer. Iroh began to utter a protest, but the words died on his lips. He studied his friend in the moonlight and discovered he could no longer offer such false assurances. The young rake who had trained recruits on Showa Field during the day and shamelessly caroused the city at night was diminishing before his eyes, replaced ever more clearly by the visage of the professional soldier that stood before him.

Iroh finally nodded in response.

“Okay, enough of that,” Nikon said finally, squaring his shoulders. “Time for me to go.”

He picked up his helmet, turned back to his friend and said simply, “Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I never had a real friend before you, and you’ve been the best friend…”

Iroh, his eyes tearing up instantly at the proffered goodbye, stepped forward and caught Nikon in a bear hug, “No, stop! I won’t listen! We will meet again, alive and victorious in the southern pass, our enemy smashed between us, you’ll see! You and Xian have to live,” Iroh pleaded, “Please! What would I do without you both?”

The young commoner hugged him back and replied with conviction, “You’d go on, somehow, but no one’s giving up, Your Highness, I swear.”

They released each other with one final pat on the other’s back. Nikon stepped away and saluted, a gesture his friend returned, before turning and walking back the way he had come without uttering another word. Iroh watched him go, his feet kicking up dust as he went. A few moments later he was gone, leaving the camp shrouded once again under the unnatural blanket of perfect silence and leaden expectation.
Chapter Summary

Prince Iroh and Xian exchange farewells before the Battle of Lake Myojin commences.

Iroh turned to resume his lonely vigil, but stopped short as his eyes detected a shadow at the entrance to his tent. His thoughts of melancholy vanished as he shifted seamlessly into a bending stance. Months of high intensity combat had taught him, and every other soldier who had survived this far, to be ready to fight for one’s life at a moment’s notice.

His body relaxed, but his mind quailed the moment the shadow spoke.

“So, do I need to take a ticket?” came the familiar voice with a trace of amusement, “I don’t know anyone else who has a receiving line at four in the morning.”

Xian stepped out of the tent and into the moonlight, a tired, but genuine smile on his face. He carried a black scroll tube in one hand. Iroh began to salute, but the gesture died with just a slight movement of his arm. He knew why his cousin was here. Just as Nikon had, Xian had come to say goodbye.

The world dimmed further in Iroh’s perception as the adrenalin rush from the sudden intrusion drained away and a sick feeling of shame washed over him. He steadied himself by leaning on a neighboring crate. How much had he heard? Iroh wondered. Xian stepped forward to help, but his cousin waved him off.

“You startled me, cousin,” Iroh replied lamely, “Nikon and I were just… exchanging farewells.”

Xian nodded, failing to give any hint as to whether he had been privy to their conversation.

“And now, it is our turn,” Xian affirmed patiently, “I too leave in a few hours. We will either meet again in the southern pass, or… we won’t. Either way, we have a few things to talk about, you and I.”

Iroh eyed the black tube in his cousin’s hand. Its polished surface reflected the moonlight as Xian turned slightly to face him. A few moments passed, but the tightness in Iroh’s chest had returned. He did not trust himself to reply. Anger, fear, shame and frustration warred within him. He squeezed his eyes shut to prevent the tears he felt burning his eyes from falling.

“You’re afraid of losing us,” Xian stated simply with a nod of his head, “I know.”

At this the Crown Prince sank to his knees.

“Please, cousin,” Iroh pleaded, his voice thick, “Let me…”

“No,” Xian cut him off gently, dropping to the ground in front of Iroh, “I know what you want to ask, but you cannot come with us,” he continued, shaking his head, “Don’t misunderstand, I would do… anything to have you there with me.”

“Then let me come, I can help, I promise…”
“I know you could,” Xian assured him, then with quiet pride and satisfaction continued, “You have become a great warrior, and an even greater leader, just as I knew you would. You are feared by your enemies, loved by your friends, your soldiers, and the people. It is because of that, that I cannot let you come with us. If I’m wrong, if it’s a trap, you will be needed here.”

Looking deep into his cousin’s eyes, Xian pressed forward in a firmer voice, “Iroh, if the worst befalls me, I want you to open this and do as it instructs.”

One moment Iroh was awash with emotion, seemingly incapable of influencing what he felt, let alone understanding or controlling the situation around him. The next, he felt still, as if the veil of dreadful silence which enveloped the camp had penetrated his very soul. Iroh felt his grip weaken on his cousin’s arm, then, a moment later, he felt his hand fall leaden into his lap.

Slowly Xian extended his other hand and offered him the black tube.

“How do you understand?”

The dark cylinder hung between them. Iroh reached out and took the tube. It felt cold and hard, a slice of death.

“Yes,” Iroh supplied in a flat tone, his gaze sliding off his cousin and focusing on nothing.

“Good,” then, after a few moments of silence continued, “Are you all right?”

Iroh turned slowly back to Xian and said, “All right? You’re telling me you’re going to die, and you ask me if I am all right?”

“I did not say that, Iroh,” Xian reproached with a trace of sternness, “This is a precaution. I do not know why Tien Shin pushed this attack so strongly, but I suspect his motives, as do Nikon and Gan.”

“Then call off the attack!” Iroh roared suddenly, his cheeks flushing red, “If you believe it’s a trap, whether begat by Nifong or Tien Shin, then why go?”

Xian sighed. It had been less than twelve hours since that question had arisen, and yet he was as tired of it as if it had plagued him his whole life.

Waiting for Iroh to calm himself before he replied, Xian finally answered, his voice rising in intensity as he went, “For two reasons, Iroh. First, because I don’t know it’s a trap. And if it’s not, then this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for to turn the war around. Imagine for a moment,” he continued, a pained expression twisting his gentle facial features, “if this were our true opening, and we failed to seize it? Could we ever forgive ourselves for wasting what is probably our last opportunity to end this… this… endless, hateful massacre we call a war? And if we fail here now, how will we feel about the hundreds of thousands of our people who surely will die before we are finally conquered?”

“Yes, cousin,” Xian continued at Iroh’s shocked expression, “conquered. For surely the Fire Nation shall be conquered if we fail. The Fire Lord has summoned the entire strength of the empire for this campaign, and if we suffer the same fate as my father the Fire Nation will not survive long.”

“Do you really believe the situation is that bad, cousin?” asked Iroh in barely a whisper.

“Yes, I do, and so does the Fire Lord.”

“What is the second reason?” Iroh prompted after a moment of shocked silence.
“Second,” Xian continued, “because whether he is plotting or not, I can find no gap in Tien Shin’s logic. If I fail to prosecute the war, your father will have me executed for treason when I return. Tien Shin will see to that. You know that, don’t you?”

Emotionally exhausted, Iroh nodded glumly and looked at the ground between them.

“Now,” Xian continued in a more relaxed tone, “I have some good news for you.”

Iroh lifted his head to meet his cousin’s eyes. Xian looked old and tired in the pale light of the water tribe’s patron spirit, but his gaze was steady.

“Normally the Qu’ai Tau would accompany us on such a venture, to make sure the troops don’t take for themselves the spoils of victory that rightfully belong to the Fire Lord, you understand,” he said with a quiet laugh, “but in this case I have asked Gan to remain with you. Nikon, of course, must go.”

“Thanks,” he replied, lowering his head once again. This news failed utterly to provide any comfort to the Crown Prince. It did nothing to lift the pall of dread that had settled on his soul, or limit the anguish he felt at being left behind while his cousin and his best friend went to fight for their lives and the fate of the Fire Nation.

“Don’t look so sad, cousin,” Xian prodded, his smile widening, “look at the bright side, at least I’m taking Chieng along.”

Iroh, jolted briefly from his despair, laughed hollowly and quipped, “Just make sure she’s out front, would you?”

“Not a bad idea,” Xian mused, “if Nifong has the same reaction to her as everyone else I doubt he’ll even show up at all! On the other hand, if he does show up,” equivocated Xian, successfully avoiding reuse of the word “trap”, “maybe running him over with one of her tank trains is our best hope.”

“She certainly has courage,” remarked Iroh absently.

Both sighed and lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

“What are you thinking about now, cousin?” queried Iroh after some time had passed.

Xian looked at the ground and replied without a trace of irony, ”Oh, your favorite story, actually, the Battle of the Coral Sea.”

Iroh nodded once and looked down as well, for he thought he understood why his cousin’s mind would stray to that tale at such a time.

“I know you hate the story after hearing it so many times, but I never stopped loving it,” Xian began to explain, “After father died, I couldn’t wait for the Harvest Moon feast to come so I could hear it again. No matter how bad the storyteller was, it didn’t matter… I just wanted to feel like my father was still alive…”

‘My favorite part, you know, was always the night between the first and second day of the battle, when your father and my father’s ships had been separated, and the situation looked bad, really bad. The best storytellers always conjured up for me images of my father’s mighty battleship, the Atragon, wounded but unbowed, standing with a hundred other ships of the line blocking the Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom’s combined fleet, the wrecks of hundreds of Fire Nation and enemy ships between them.”
“I used to dream of him standing on the bridge that night, looking at the stars, trying to make the best
decision he could in such an awful situation. Trapped with his ships in the bay, I know your father
did the same.”

“You know the rest. The night attack turned the battle around and two days later the enemy was
destroyed. Your father and mine became heroes, just as they should have been. But that night…” he
said wistfully, “that night… they were just as vulnerable and afraid as we are now… or worse.”

“I used to wonder at how smart, strong and brave they were, and I wanted to be just like them. Then,
not long before he left and never returned, I asked father how he knew to attack that night, and you
know what he said?”

“No, what did he say?”

“He said, “I didn’t. I took the risk and prayed for victory.” I never really believed him until long after
he died when I got some experience under General Shu. Now I know,” Xian concluded bitterly, “no
matter how carefully one plans or how virtuous you are, luck, fate or fortune, whatever you want to
call it, rules us all.”

Then, suddenly, Xian smiled, slapped Iroh’s knee once and stood up. Iroh immediately followed suit.

“Now, cousin, time to part company.”

Xian stepped forward and hugged his cousin fiercely.

“You will make an excellent Fire Lord one day. I am so proud of you.”

Iroh tried desperately to reply, but he choked. He raised his arms across his cousin’s shoulders and
the black tube he still held in his hand came to rest across his cousin’s back.

“Don’t forget me,” Xian said finally through gritted teeth in a choked voice of his own.

“Never,” Iroh replied thickly, his eyesight obscured by a flood of tears, “Don’t you forget me.”

“Never, no more than I could forget mother or father,” his cousin vowed.

Xian released his cousin and wiped his eyes. He looked over his cousin’s shoulder to see the first
rosy fingers of dawn staining the eastern sky.

“Time to go,” he said quickly, then added, “and remember what I said about the instructions.”

Iroh nodded as he wiped his own eyes. A moment later Xian turned and walked away using the
same path Nikon had earlier. Miserable, Iroh sat down once again, knowing he had just seen his
cousin for the last time.

“…and so,” the Storyteller concluded, “their miserable hour come round at last, General Xian and
Nikon Orlando departed for the Meiji Pass on treads of iron and hearts of lead. The death ride of the
Army of the Great Divide began with favorable weather and good spirits amongst the soldiers of the
Fire Nation, and ended with everlasting glory for the Earth Kingdom on the blood soaked shores of
Lake Myojin…”

Iroh, unable to thrust aside any longer the images of his cousin and his son, realized with horror that
he had begun to cry. “Forgive me, Prince Zuko, now I have failed you as well…”
Lake Myojin

Chapter Summary

The Battle of Lake Myojin begins.

Nikon squinted as he tried in vain to pierce the white shroud that enveloped them. His hands involuntarily gripped the top hatch cleats as his tank crawled at an agonizingly slow pace through the dense fog. On either side only the dim, shadowy outlines of the closest machines could be seen. The rest of the army could be heard, but was otherwise lost in the impenetrable mist.

“This is bad, Commander, bad, bad, bad,” hissed the tank driver through clenched teeth from somewhere below, “First the charts turned out to be trash, and now… now this. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“That’s enough, Jin,” Nikon replied sternly from his position atop the vehicle, “That kind of talk won’t help us.”

Jin grimaced and replied stoically, “Yes, Commander.”

Nikon left it at that. He knew the tank driver was correct. The army’s mood had improved dramatically with the easy investment of Amiganza three days prior, but had then declined steadily as the Ping Tou Mountains drew near. The Fire Nation maps had shown that the foothills never came within ten leagues of the Coast Road, but this intelligence had proven incorrect. As dusk fell the night before the distance between the lake shore and the mountains had shrunk to no more than a few miles. On their right the snowcapped peaks of the Ping Tou now looked close enough to touch and the low slopes of its foothills almost ran down to the beach. On their left the Coast Road was often no more than a few hundred feet from the restless waves of Lake Myojin.

Morale had visibly worsened that morning when the army awoke to a fresh horror. A cold westerly wind from the mountains, initially greeted as a welcome change after the hot dusty months of summer warfare, had sprung up during the night. By dawn the wind had changed direction and a thick layer of fog had rolled in off the lake that obscured everything. The officers had narrowly avoided a panic amongst the men before attending a hastily arranged meeting of the general staff in Xian’s tent. The debate had raged over whether to continue moving forward or to delay.

“This is ridiculous, General,” Nikon offered boldly, “Pardon the pun, but the mountains are literally a stone’s throw away – much closer to our invasion route than we ever anticipated, and now we can’t even see the tops of those foothills with the fog. If this is a setup, can you imagine a better place for a trap than this? I mean, we’ve at least got to hold up until the fog goes away.”

“You speak fluent cowardice, Nikon,” Chieng replied acidly, “How many times do we have to repeat the same crap over and over for the benefit of fools? We scouted those foothills before the weather went to hell and found nothing - nothing! You’re obviously overcompensating for your stupidity at Cam’ron. Get over it.”

Nikon laughed and, smiling suggestively at the engineer, disagreed, “I’m drawing conclusions based on the facts. Weren’t you the one who was supposed to be good at that?”
Chieng responded with a contemptuous snort and looked away. An uncomfortable silence descended. Xian looked haggard and said nothing. Tien Shin regarded Nikon with an inscrutable expression before turning to examine the map before them.

“The scouts say the mountains pull sharply away from the lake shore about ten or twelve miles ahead,” observed the daimyo as he indicated a spot on the map south of their current position, “and that our westward turn into the southern pass is about thirty miles beyond that,” he concluded, indicating still another point on the map.

“We should run it, my Lord,” insisted Commander Tojo, “We could get the whole column through by late afternoon if we push it.”

“Of course we should,” Chieng added, “We’ve seen nothing more than stragglers and a few messengers since Highhold Pass, none of which have survived to tell any tales. Just move through and be done with it.”

Chieng’s assertion hung in the air for a few moments before Commander Ryu spoke.

“Why? What’s the rush? We’re almost a day ahead of schedule as is. Further, it’s worth noting that we are initiating this battle, not Prince Iroh and the infantry. As long as they are in position by the time we engage, which they should be by tomorrow if they’re on schedule, it should work.”

“The reason for the rush, Commander,” rebutted Tien Shin with more than a tinge of annoyance, “is that surprise is absolutely critical to our success. We’re planning a battle in a mountain pass against earthbenders, or had you forgotten? Every hour we delay is a chance for news of our movement to reach the enemy. Our success depends on our ability to move faster than rumor. If they have time to prepare for us it will surely turn victory into catastrophic defeat. We can’t allow that.”

“Well,” injected Commander Cho, Tien Shin’s most conservative battalion leader, “do we have any idea how long this fog is likely to last? We passed what, two or three fishing villages on the way here and took hostages. Have we asked them anything about it?”

“Yes,” replied Xian, speaking softly for the first time, “they said the lake shore is often subject to these fogs from now until spring.”

“They’re lying,” Chieng stated flatly, “If that were true how would they feed themselves for eight months of the year? You don’t think you can go out fishing and get back home safely in a fog like this? Not with the primitive pieces of crap these people use for fishing boats, I guarantee you that.”

No one answered.

“Ignorant savages the lot of them,” she concluded.

The daimyo, obviously weary of the discussion, turned and addressed Xian saying, “The truth is we don’t know how long the fog will last. It might burn off by afternoon or it might be days. I agree with Commander Tojo, it’s a risk, but I think we should get through the defile as fast as possible.”

The debate had ended there with Xian quietly acquiescing to the near unanimous, if discomfited, consensus. Within thirty minutes the army was once again moving southward along the Coast Road. The column retained the order that it had used since crossing the Meiji pass, with Nikon and Ryu’s formations in front, Tien Shin and his brigades behind, followed in the rear by Xian’s own troops and Chieng’s tank trains. The Fire Nation right flank was carried by the mongoose cavalry still in service after the army had been reorganized in the spring.

Mulling over these melancholy memories from the morning, however, brought no comfort to Iroh's
friend. “At least there aren't any large stones down here near the lake,” he observed as the painfully slow advance continued, "Now there’s nothing to do but move, and pray to the Spirits that we pass through the eye of this needle safely."

With conscious effort Nikon forced himself to unclench his fists which had curled up tight with the rising tension. It was now mid-morning and he was certain that the entire Fire Nation army was in the defile. He peered ahead once more. Try as he might, however, he could see nothing but the white, slowly drifting fog banks and hear only the sounds of moving machines and the occasional break of waves against the shore.

The green clad general and his aide stood on a promontory that offered a good view of the western shore of Lake Myojin. Below them on the narrow strip of boulder strewn beach offered by the lake’s southern shore stood thousands of Earth Kingdom soldiers. The general’s attention, however, was not directed at the men below.

Nifong carefully surveyed the situation to the northwest through a short sighting scope. The western shore, no more than ten miles away, was completely concealed by a dense fog that rose in steadily thickening wisps from the lake surface. The tops of the foothills leading up to the Ping Tou Mountains beyond could be seen clearly poking through the milky white clouds. Suddenly flashes of light began emanating from two of these low peaks. These were joined moments later by similar flashes from the tops of the other hills.

“That’s the signal, General,” confirmed his aide, seeing the same thing through his instrument.

Nifong offered no reply other than to collapse his scope and replace it in his kit. His aide quickly followed suit.

They were joined a moment later by a tall man with long black hair dressed in the tranquil, cerulean blue of the Northern Water Tribe. His erect posture spoke of discipline and an unyielding nature, the sharp angular lines of his face and sarcastic smile spoke of ego and pride. The newcomer squinted with eagle sharp eyes in the same direction the two Earth Kingdom soldiers faced.

Grunting in approval after a quick assessment, the water tribe man spoke.

“An excellent day for battle, General,” he mused approvingly; "You couldn’t have picked a better place or asked for better circumstances. The fog is a great bonus."

“It is, Master Pakku, though it was always likely at this time of year,” Nifong replied absently, for long ago he had been born on the shores of Lake Myojin and knew much concerning the features and conditions of the region.

“Our hill positions haven’t been discovered then?” the water bender asked with a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

“No.”

“I overestimated our enemy,” Pakku concluded with a laugh, then continuing in a conspiratorial tone, “though I shouldn’t be surprised. I hear these machines of theirs were designed by a woman – a woman! Can you believe that?” he asked, shaking his head incredulously, “Absolutely scandalous!”

The Master Waterbender folded his arms across his chest and allowed himself a self-satisfied smile of utter contempt.
“Hiding earthbenders on rocky hills with days to prepare doesn’t take much skill,” Nifong replied evenly before asking, “Are your waterbenders ready?”

“Of course, and I can’t wait to see their faces when we arrive, assuming I can pry some of their helmets off before they die to get the satisfaction. I don’t think they’ve seen waterbenders this far south since my grandfather’s time. I bet they don’t even believe we exist anymore,” his grin growing wider and his expression more dangerous as he spoke, “It will be my pleasure to educate them.”

“Yes,” Nifong remarked thoughtfully, finally turning to face the master waterbender, “I’m sure it will.” Stepping closer to Pakku he continued with sudden intensity, “Just remember, target the machines, forget the men. They will be powerless without their machines.”

“I will remember, General, though that rests more in the hands of your men than mine.”

Nifong regarded his ally for a moment longer before turning back to the scene before him. The flashes of light from the hilltops had ceased.

“Everyone below is ready,” Pakku continued, “How about the men over there, are they ready?” he asked, indicating the hilltops with his chin.

“Yes, Master Pakku,” supplied the aide, “we just saw the signal lights.”

Pakku grunted approval again before looking behind them down the path on which they had come. There a sizable body of Earth Kingdom cavalry had completed their preparations and stood ready to move.

“You sure that’s enough?” he asked, pointing a finger at the rows of ostrich horses behind them.

“Yes,” the Earth Kingdom general responded, “we only need to keep them bottled up. It won’t be hard. If the cavalry have to loose one arrow or lob one stone I’ll be surprised.”

“Then we’re ready,” Pakku concluded, his smug and superior attitude gone, “Let’s get on with it.”

“Yes,” replied Nifong, suppressing a sigh, “go, Master Pakku, and may the Spirits of the Moon, Ocean and Earth be with us.”

The waterbender smiled once more, this time gently, and placed a hand on Nifong’s shoulder in a gesture of friendship.

“I know they will, General. We have everything we need to win. You have made sure of it. Chief Kikluk was right to send us, even though many on the Council had doubts. The Earth Kingdom is not ready to die yet, and neither is the Northern Water Tribe.”

Nifong smiled wryly and nodded once in affirmation. Pakku dropped his arm and his expression became hard. He turned and began walking down the path to the beach.

“This is really it, isn’t it, General?” asked the aide in a small voice when the waterbender disappeared from view.

“Yes, Captain, it really is.”

They both turned their attention to the beach below. Soon groups of blue clad men began winding their way through the earthbender ranks. Whistles began to blow, prompting the soldiers in green to start moving all at once. Breaking formation everyone climbed onto the nearest stone. The beach was heavily populated with large rocks worn flat and smooth by eons of relentless wave action. Some
boulders ended up with dozens of men on them.

Nifong and his aide could hear shouts wafting up from below and feel the exertion of earthbending power as their men began lifting up the boulders on which they stood. With an almost audible hum, thousands of earthbenders squatted atop their chariots of stone and tensed their muscles and wills, commanding their native element to obey them. Moments later every stone large enough to hold more than a few men hovered several feet above the beach.

The waterbenders had formed a line at the lake edge. Nifong watched as Pakku turned his head back and forth in a quick survey of his countrymen. When the Earth Kingdom soldiers were prepared, Pakku thundered in a clear voice that resonated along the lake shore, "Waterbenders of the North, begin!"

Using graceful moves that belied the strength and fortitude required to manipulate their element, the men of the north began to collect the water around them. The lake retreated rapidly from the shore as it gathered itself into the burgeoning wave. Working in unison they quickly built a solid wall of water from one end of the beach to the other.

In rapid succession the men in green then proceeded to hurl themselves and their rock platforms onto the crest of the stationary wave in front of them. Soon the wall of water was graced with a stone crenellation that bore upon it thousands of the Earth Kingdom's most powerful earthbenders. The men in blue then stepped forward into the lake and ran up the wave's gentler slope, joining their Earth Kingdom comrades on their makeshift rafts of stone.

When all was prepared Master Pakku turned and looked up at the promontory in quiet expectation. Thousands of pairs of eyes joined him. The jostling and yelling that had filled the air with such tumult only moments before melted away to a silence disturbed only by the sound of the wind and water.

The General raised his arm above his head and with a simple sweeping motion brought it down. "Forward!" Pakku thundered in acknowledgment of the signal.

Once again in near perfect unison the men in blue executed a precise series of fluid motions. With a great heave the stationary wave suddenly began to move towards the northwest, bearing with it thousands of tons of stone and the allied army riding upon it. The moving wall of water, men and mineral quickly accelerated away from the lake shore, gathering both height and speed as it went. Minutes later the gigantic wave disappeared into the swirling vapors that obscured the western shore.

Turning away from the panorama Nifong and his aide marched swiftly back down the path to the waiting cavalry. Once mounted, the Earth Kingdom general addressed his men briefly with some words appropriate to the occasion. He observed dimly to himself as he gave a speech he never remembered that he should feel something. Exhilaration. Anxiety. Nervousness. He remembered these sensations from a hundred other battles he had planned and fought. Instead he felt only a numbness that obliterated everything, even the curiosity born of expectation.

When he was finished he led his men west along the lake shore, quickly covering the few miles between the camp and the place where the last, jutting spur of the Ping Tou began to pull southwest, away from the lake shore.

There they lay in wait, peering into the edges of the cloud banks before them, as the sounds of approaching machinery, still weak in the distance, grew ever louder.

Nifong closed his eyes and offered a last prayer, "O Spirit of the Earth, our course is set. Into thy
hands I commit our lives. Smile today upon your children who offer themselves as living gifts upon the altar of freedom. For the sake of the faithful, for the countless souls who have suffered and lost, for all that is good and gracious in this world, grant us victory."

He opened his eyes to the sounds of the first stones falling on the approaching Fire Nation column and knew the prayer was unnecessary. The thousands of earthbenders concealed amongst the foothills had begun their assault a few minutes too early. Unfortunate, to be sure, but it would not change the outcome he knew to be inevitable. The Battle of Lake Myojin had begun.
“This isn’t a battle, Captain…it’s simply murder.”

Something was wrong. They could all feel it. In the belly of their tank Nikon's crew exchanged tense, worried glances of quiet desperation. The unease was palpable, but the source could not be identified. The fog continued to swirl. The slow, rhythmic drone of the Fire Nation war machines continued to fill the air.

Iroh’s friend craned his neck forward for what must have been the hundredth time, but saw nothing. He looked backwards and saw the machines behind him for a few moments before they were swallowed by the mist, only to reappear a few moments later. He looked to his left towards the lake. He could see the sand and rock of the beach, but not far enough to see the water. His search revealed nothing.

Then he identified it. He hadn’t heard a wave against the shore for some time. It had been part of the background noise, but the beach had gone strangely silent. How long it had been that way he couldn’t be certain. Disturbed, but unsure what the realization meant, he bent down to tell his driver to stop the machine. The order was never given.

Nikon felt the rush of displaced air before he heard the boulder come crashing down a few feet in front of them. Reacting automatically as he had countless times before, he crouched down and pulled the upper hatch shut behind him. Before he had time to speak their machine crashed into the rubble that just hit the ground in front of them. The impact knocked the gunners out of their seats and slammed Nikon into the hull. The engine whined as the left tread climbed over the crushed remains of the fallen projectile. A second later the machine came back down with another disorienting crash.

“Goddamit!” the young tank commander screamed in his head. Clenching his fist deliberately this time, he struggled to suppress the feelings of rage and impotence that welled up within him.

“Right turn! 90 degrees! Battle speed!” he screamed, his voice cracking.

Outside the ground shook with a dozen other impacts that came in quick succession.

Jin yanked the controls savagely. The machine quickly gained speed and lurched to the right.

"Stick to the plan! Get us some defilade, Jin!" Nikon instructed the driver before turning to the others and shouting, "Gunners, stand by to convert!"

His mind quailed, but he refused to show it. With a twist of the handle and a sudden push Nikon popped the top hatch open once again. Standing up and straining his ears he could tell from the hoarse shouts and sounds of combat that Earth Kingdom cavalry had swept down from the foothills and was now driving into the exposed Fire Nation right. Worse, the huge volume of stones and the storms of arrows dropping on the column and the long, sloping arcs with which they fell spoke eloquently of the large numbers of earthbender artillerymen and archers who occupied the tops of the surrounding foothills.
The fact that his fears had just been proven justified provided no comfort or satisfaction whatsoever.

“Damn them! Damn them to hell!” he clarified bitterly. He never hated anyone at that moment as much as he hated Tien Shin, Chieng, and to his utter surprise, Xian. With an effort beyond any that should be required of a man, Nikon crushed the pointless question of “why?” and forced himself to focus.

The machine now faced west toward the approaching sound of battle, a dull roar which only seemed to increase in intensity all around them. Within a few hundred feet they ran into a shallow depression at the base of a low hill. The driver cut the engine right before they crested so that the firing ports now looked out over open sky. Beside them the other tanks of the Fifth Brigade began to follow suit.

“That’s the best I can do, Commander!” came Jin’s pleading voice up the communication vent, “The main fight seems to be shaping up in front of us and the plan was –”

“Shut up, Jin, it’s good enough!” Nikon yelled in reply. He was right, the angle wouldn’t provide much cover from the overhead bombardment, but it was better than nothing. From this position at least they could begin indirect fire against the enemy hilltop positions.

Below him the crew moved into action. Quickly and efficiently they removed steel plates on either side of the tank’s rear section. Between the openings was a thick metal shaft that ran through a large winch mounted above the engine case. A huge length of rope was coiled tightly around the winch. A simple hand brake locking mechanism prevented the taut rope from discharging its reservoir of energy. With the plates removed and the shaft exposed to the outside, the gunners pulled open lockers at the back and began to pull out more equipment.

Shifting his attention from the work taking place below, Nikon watched with grim satisfaction as three more vehicles pulled up behind them and began the same process.

“If we live through this,” Nikon promised himself bitterly, “I’m going to kill that son of a bitch, I swear it.” At that moment even he wasn’t sure who he was referring to. All he knew is that he wanted to wreak vengeance on someone for the miserable predicament he and his soldiers now found themselves.

A boulder hit the front of the farthest tank. The machine and crew disappeared in the mist for a moment after the impact, but when they reappeared it was clear the projectile had exploded into bits of rock and did no damage. The crew of the stricken vehicle had dismounted despite the blast, which was still undoubtedly ringing in their ears, and were now attaching shaft extensions and catapult arms to each side of the tank as if nothing had happened. Nikon allowed himself a moment of pride in the men who refused to panic in the face what was obviously a wretched position.

A single glance below indicated his crew was ready. Nikon hopped lightly out of the hatch and stood on the deck plate. The side gunners climbed out behind him and jumped down to the ground.

On a sudden impulse Iroh’s friend jumped to the ground and mounted the crest of the hill in a few steps. He was joined moments later by the lieutenants from the other tanks now defiladed on the hill.

“We’re ready, Commander,” spoke the youngest of them breathlessly, eyes wide with apprehension, “should we start?”

Nikon did not immediately reply, instead looking intently down the hill towards the sounds of combat. The fog still obscured everything around them, but the sun had risen high enough that everything moving beyond the edge of the misty veil appeared as vast shapes wreathed in glowing nimbus of light. Through the fog they could see the outlines of the bloody cavalry battle in front of
them. Shadows of men, ostrich horses and mongoose dragons could be seen like ghostly apparitions, punctuated by the orange flames of the firebenders and the resounding impacts of the earthbenders’ art.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” their commander finally replied, “get the catapults going as soon as you can, don’t wait for me.”

The lieutenants didn’t move. The pride he felt a few moments ago was instantly replaced with concern at the worry he saw in these faces. “They look like kids, but they aren’t more than a few years younger than me, are they? How did I get here?” he wondered.

Shouting confidently over the tumult he taunted, “Hey, what’s this? The mighty Fifth Brigade afraid of a fight? What will Fire Lord Azulon say if he hears of this?”

The lieutenants shared a glance of mutual shame before turning back to Nikon.

“Come on! Use your heads!” He gestured at his own tank, where the crew was fitting the last catapult arm into place, and then at the tank which had just been hit.

“They’re not doing anything different than before! Those rock bombs can’t touch us. Let the cavalry do its job and fog or no fog we’ll get the hell out of here! So get over there and let’s answer their artillery with our own!”

As if to emphasize Nikon’s point a large stone impacted the hill crest near them, followed quickly by two more. Showered by a hail of rock fragments, the lieutenants needed no further incentive and quickly ran back to their machines. Iroh’s friend did not flinch, but instead watched calmly as all four tanks began to load and launch projectiles of flaming pitch at the hilltops in front of them. Soon the mist to either side of them was alight with flashes of orange and red as his men and Ryu’s farther up the road began to engage.

“This is bad,” he admitted to himself, “but it’s not a disaster – not yet…”

The sounds of combat grew ever louder. The mist, cool and wet before the fighting had started, had become a smoky, dust filled liquid that quickly began to burn Nikon’s lungs. The dull roar of battle had become unbearable, but beneath it, almost beyond his senses ability to detect it, Nikon felt an ominous, low rolling drumbeat, like a peal of thunder stretched over many minutes.

Finally acknowledging the risk of his exposed position atop the hill, Nikon jogged back down towards his men. Just as they had planned in case of an ambush, he could see a third row of tanks now setting up their catapults behind the first two. The fog continued to swirl, but seemed to be dissipating. Nikon felt relief at this new hope, but the ominous sound he identified earlier had only intensified, and now had taken on an additional rushing quality, as if a vast amount of air or liquid were moving around them.

Nikon reached his machine and began to mount, casting a quick glance toward the lake.

He froze in place, stupefied.

At that moment the fog parted to reveal the shoreline. There was no water. The break in the mist might last a few more seconds, but at that moment he could see clearly over hundreds of feet of beach and empty lake bed. Much later he thought he might have had time to wonder whether the tide had gone out. On the other hand, he might have imagined it.

The next moment was burned into his memory for the rest of his life. The fog in the distance turned suddenly dark as the source of the deep, rushing thunder revealed itself in stark silhouette against the
mist. Before Nikon could utter an exclamation the tsunami shattered the milky white veil that concealed it.

Stretching from one edge of his vision to the other a wave with a crest higher than the fabled topless towers of Ilium rolled relentlessly toward them. To his thunderstruck eyes it seemed as though the lake itself had risen out of its basin and bore down on them with inhuman fury.

Nikon himself remained frozen, his mouth agape in utter horror, his eyes transfixed on the most glorious and terrifying display of elemental mastery ever witnessed by man. The crown of stone and men could be clearly seen atop the monstrous wave, but Nikon did not notice them. His mind was overflowing with the single, clear thought that rang in his head.

“We’re going to die.”

Ripping himself from the spectacle, he screamed into the open hatch below.

“Move, move, move!”

“But, wha-”

“Now, now, now!”

Hearing panic in his commander’s voice for the first time, Jin obeyed. The tank lunged forward, cresting the hill within a few seconds. Nikon pulled his head out of the hatch to steady himself as the machine accelerated. Nikon screamed and motioned wildly to the crews of all the nearby vehicles, but few heard. As they pulled away he could see the lieutenant of the adjacent machine turn to see what Nikon had been looking at – and freeze. He never moved again until the water hit him less than a minute later.

Speeding westwards down the back of the low hill, Nikon quailed as the air was rent by an earth shattering roar from behind them and to the left. The wave had already come ashore farther north. A moment later the ground began to heave beneath them as the shock of the impact propagated along the surface.

Within seconds the noise and rush of combat was replaced with what seemed a single shriek of terror, as the minds and hearts of many thousands of men were seized at the same moment with the certainty of their own deaths.

Hanging on to the hatch cleats, Nikon bounced back and forth in the well as the shocks reverberated. They had mounted the nearest ridge and were climbing again at breakneck speed. The driver cursed loudly as their machine plowed right over two Fire Nation mongoose cavalrymen who had the bad luck to appear suddenly out of the mist in front of them.

Iroh’s friend saw none of this. Transfixed, he stared backwards in horror as the monstrous wave broke along the shore now a few thousand feet behind them. Soon after he saw the first and second lines of the Fifth Brigade disappear beneath the wall of water, followed swiftly by the tardiest of the vehicles that had heeded his shouted warnings.

He turned right at the sound of tortured engines to see the shadowy outlines of two tank trains and dozens of tanks that had escaped from the disaster on the northern part of the beach racing up the slope of the ridge to their northwest. Close still he could see that a few tanks of his own command had reacted quickly as well and were now ascending the ridge with them. He could also hear the heavy pounding of cavalry fleeing to the high ground, but could not see them.

Regaining his voice Nikon shouted below, “Faster! Faster! We’ve got to climb! It’s our lives!”
"I know! I know! Please, Sir, I’m doing…” Jin left the sentence unfinished as the controls again demanded his undivided attention.

They reached the top of the ridge, allowing Nikon to look down onto the crest of the looming monster. Without emotion, for shock upon shock had numbed his senses, Nikon finally saw the truth of their predicament. Clearly now he could see the stone battlements of the tidal wave and the blue and green clad warriors who populated them.

“We are beaten then,” he thought with only a touch of sadness, for such was all he could muster. He thought of wily old Nifong and his bogus letter and concluded absently, "A genius after all."

Nikon’s perception of reality wobbled sickeningly as the wave smashed into the base of the ridge. As the water and the allied army borne upon it rose up the slope to meet him, images of his friends flashed before his mind. Iroh. Gan. A childhood friend who had died in the slums long ago. Master Chen. Xian. The prostitute murdered in that Shinjuku alley. A simple summary that he accepted without complaint.

Then, suddenly, the slow motion, nightmarish stupor that had descended upon him the moment he had seen the silhouette of the liquid monster against the fog lifted. A mad rush of action followed. The wave, broken by the front of the ridge, but still powered by tremendous forward momentum, flowed up and over the crest of the top of the long hill as it diminished.

Water swirled around the treads of the tank and within seconds rose up and over the deck plating to slosh against the low sides of the top hatch. He heard panicked sounds from below as water rushed into the hull through the exposed catapult ports. The machine’s engine stuttered and died as the exhaust pipes went under water, but their forward motion barely slowed as the water pushed them down the backside of the ridge.

“Come up top, all of you!” he screamed below as he swung himself out of the manhole and on top of the deck plating. The water came up to his knees, but did not rise farther.

As the crew exited an enormous stone loaded with green and blue clad soldiers flew by at high speed before disappearing into the grey mist that still hung over the deluged battlefield. They were cheering loudly. Moments later two smaller rocks passed by, both equally laden with the enemy.

Nikon turned his attention to the water around them. The dingy brown liquid began to subside almost as suddenly as it had appeared. The tank had stopped moving and was now just another obstruction around which the water flowed.

He looked back up the hill. Evidently the wave had deluged the top of the ridge and was now cascading down the backside, but the wave’s energy had been spent. Only a small portion of the monstrous wall of water had sloshed over the top. Hope sprang within him for survival, but was almost instantly overwhelmed by the painful realization that every one of his men who had stayed put, panicked or fallen behind was now dead. The Fifth Brigade, entrusted to him by General Xian and the Fire Lord himself, was gone, destroyed in the space of a few minutes.

Jin emerged from the top hatch, the last of his crew to do so. The surly tank driver surveyed the devastation around them as the water level dropped below the deck plating once again.

“What now, sir?” he asked, raising his voice above the din of the water rushing down the backside of the ridge.

Nikon did not immediately reply. The sound of more enemy soldiers atop their transports of stone echoed through the rapidly diminishing fog as Nikon stared blankly at Jin. Iroh’s friend was aware of
his crew’s terrified eyes upon him. He turned to his left to see if any of the machines he saw moments earlier were still with them. One was about thirty feet away. There he saw the young lieutenant from before and his crew looking at him with the same huge, devastated eyes.

“Commander?” Jin prompted after more time passed, the worry evident in his voice at his leader’s lack of response.

Nikon turned away from their haunted eyes and looked at Jin. He tried to refocus, but failed. The sun, liberated at last, pierced the mist that had concealed much of the blood, if not the horror of the day. The light and warmth comforted no one. Nikon’s gaze shifted to the pretty young rear gunner who had taken the place of the one killed at Cam’ron. She was clearly in shock.

“Are we going to die?” she asked in a small voice. He didn’t even notice that she’d forgotten to address him correctly.

He didn’t have time to reply. Without warning their tank, abandoned to its fate, seemed to heave itself up off the ground and flipped clean over onto its top. The belly of the tank lay exposed to the now bright sunshine, its surface gleaming, smooth and unpainted.

A moment later another protest of groaning metal attracted their attention farther up the hill. Two other Fifth Brigade tanks that had crested the hill above them were flipped over as the mud and rock underneath shifted of its own accord.

Nikon unfroze. He panned around and saw orderly formations of green clad soldiers advancing up the hill and no less than half a dozen Earth Kingdom artillery positions on the high places around them.

“Run!” Nikon ordered. Sprinting down the muddy backside of the hill without looking behind him he heard the boulders begin to fall on the exposed bellies of the surviving machines.

“Faster! Faster, damn you!” Chieng screamed as she slammed the steering column forward. It hit the dash with such a resounding clang that she was afraid it had broken.

Below them the monstrous wave had broken against the ridge and was now chasing Chieng and her flagship tank train, Corona, up its steep slope. Corona’s mighty engines labored to outrun the watery monster that threatened to drown them.

Behind her the engineers worked feverishly to increase their speed, each trying desperately to avoid looking out the view ports at the aquatic horror rapidly catching up to them, and barking commands through the communication vents to the engine room below.

A massive explosion rocked the train from somewhere behind as it sped up the ridge. The shock loosened the top layer of ground and Corona began to spin her treads. Panic gripped the bridge crew as their ascent slowed.

“No! No! I won’t let you!” Chieng cried through gritted teeth as she cut to the left and then back to the right to allow the metal titan to regain its footing and climb from a different angle.

“What the hell was that!” yelled the Chief Boiler Operator behind her, “Did we get hit? Station managers, damage report!”

“Moron!” she screamed over the din, “Spitfire’s gone! Boiler explosion, she must’ve gone under! Cold water, hot metal, don’t you get it!”
She thrust aside the images of the other tank trains which had already suffered the same fate. When
the fog had parted to reveal the tsunami she and her crew had reacted swiftly to save their lives.
Others were not as lucky. Meteor and Starliner had been no more than a thousand feet from the
beach and were drowned instantly under many dark fathoms. Rocket had made it halfway up the
slope before she was consumed. The rest had been lost in the fog and it was on these missing
children that Chieng placed her hope.

“Please,” she prayed desperately as she fought the controls, her mind's voice betraying weakness she
would never show the outside world, “Please, if there are spirits in heaven, save the others!”

Foul mouthed, violent and highly critical, she was nevertheless fiercely proud of her people and
cared for them more than she ever allowed herself to admit. The thought of losing them terrified her.
Worse still her mind teetered dangerously on the brink of facing responsibility for their deaths.

“Look! Look! We beat it! Thank the Elements!” yelled one of the junior engineers.

Everyone turned to look out the port side windows. The tsunami had broken against the ridge, its
momentum played out. Corona had outrun the specter of her death.

Jubilation turned swiftly to horror as everyone saw what the wave had been carrying. The water was
already receding from the side of the hill, but it left behind hundreds of large stones festooned with
thousands upon thousands of Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe warriors.

“Sweet Agni!” cried the Chief in astonishment.

“So that’s it!” exclaimed Chieng with grudging respect, nodding her head in acknowledgment of the
blue clad warriors scattered amidst the sea of green.

The surly engineer yanked back on the yolk as the Corona crested the ridge. The machine halted
with a single, gut wrenching jerk. Releasing her seat belt and standing up in a single fluid motion she
took a quick survey of the situation outside. The fog had burned off at the higher elevations and
Chieng found she could see not only the entire length of the ridge but also the tops many of the
surrounding foot hills. Many of these were clearly occupied with earthbenders who were now
retraining their fire on them.

Chieng’s heart leapt in her chest as she saw two of her warforged children waiting for her. Their
markings identified them as the Sunrise and Phoenix. Around them lay a few dozen tanks, the
survivors of Tien Shin’s brigades and what appeared to be the bulk of the mongoose cavalry. In a
display of iron discipline after such a catastrophe the daimyo’s men and machines were quickly
forming a firing line on the edge of the ridge.

Farther south she could see more tanks, probably either Tojo’s or Ryu’s.

"But Nikon must be dead..." she thought, for his unit was closest to the beach in the vanguard
formation, "....he was right...and I... I...was...."

She stiffened, horrified to discover herself suddenly choking back a sob. Refusing to succumb, she
wrenched her mind away from the black chasm of despair. She took a deep breath and refocused.

More survivors from Xian’s men might yet lie to their north and east, but she couldn’t see in either of
those directions. The blow had been devastating, she admitted, but if the goal had been to destroy
them at once the gambit had not succeeded.

"I will make them pay for this!” she vowed silently, using the sudden flush of anger to drive away
the self-recrimination that had threatened to incapacitate her a moment before.
"Sir," the communications officer interrupted, "a message from the Comet astern of us!"

The young man handed her a hastily transcribed note which she scanned instantly. Her head exploded in renewed fury and hope, her mind ringing with the thought, "Xian's alive!"

A moment later she whirled around and addressed the bridge crew.

"Listen to me, all of you!" she announced, "This isn’t over yet! Do you hear me? Do you!? Blank stares were her only reply.

"Stop gaping like a pack of frightened children! General Xian is launching a counterattack against the hills northeast of us! We've got to cover them!"

"Are we going with him then?" asked the Chief.

"No, we've got to keep those filthy savages down there busy, but if we don't get a perimeter set up now this place is going to be our god damn cemetery – now move! Move!"

She then gave a series of sharp, concise orders and all at once the bridge again became a scene of focused and determined action.

It was late afternoon. The leader of the Army of the Granite Mountains looked down onto the beaches of Myojin's western shore directly below him. The fog had burned away across much of the battlefield and the magnitude of the devastation was progressively revealed with each passing moment.

The water from the massive wave was still retreating back into the lake from whence it came. Thousands of bodies in red uniforms floated grotesquely in the surf, many of their limbs bent where no joints could possibly be. Scores of dark shadows scattered amongst the shallows were the only traces of the Fire Nation machines, now reduced to watery coffins.

The amphibious landing was more terrifying than Nifong had ever dreamed. The Waterbenders of the North had summoned a monster beyond all comprehension and it had done their bidding with neither mercy nor discrimination. Many of his men had no doubt perished when the wave had passed over the lowest foothills. Still, hundreds of Fire Nation machines, including many of the massive metal dreadnoughts that haunted his men in their darkest nightmares, had been destroyed.

The Army of the Great Divide lay mortally wounded, but, he knew, the final blow had yet to be struck.

"There is time...," he thought, closing his eyes, "... time enough."

The sounds of an ostrich horse at full gallop caused him to open them once again. There was no need. His aide had returned with the report.

"Sir, best estimate is that the wave wiped out about a third of the enemy machines."

“And the rest?”

“Hard to tell, but at least another third – but probably more like half - has been destroyed by hitting the belly armor. The mud slowed the survivors down as we expected and made them easy to flip, but…” he hesitated uneasily.
"Yes?"

"We can’t account for more than four or five of those metal monsters, General."

"Not good, Captain, but expected. We were never likely to get them all in one blow."

"No sir, I guess not,” the aide conceded, biting his lip.

“What else?”

“The enemy has reorganized very fast, they've managed to overrun our positions on hill 103, the long one, 106 and 107. We have a report that at least one of the dreadnoughts is up there, but I haven’t got confirmation of that yet. 106 and 107 overlook the northern and the two northeastern exits, sir. They'll probably try to break out there."

"You sound surprised, Captain,” Nifong observed.

"Well,” the younger man replied slowly, "You'd think they'd have broken after getting hit with such a disaster. It scared the hell out of me, sir," he admitted, "and I was just watching it from here. Half of them just drowned, the rest are surrounded. How can they go on fighting?"

"Because they are disciplined. Because they are fighting for their lives. Because they are driven by pride, ambition, and fear of surviving only to return home in failure and dishonor. Did you really expect them to simply lie down and die?"

"No, sir,” the younger man replied with some confusion, “but I thought they'd have tried to surrender or just disintegrated. Anyway, it won’t change the outcome, will it?”

“No, it won’t.”

"Then this battle will be your greatest victory,” the younger man concluded with certainty.

“This isn’t a battle, Captain,” Xian's opponent disagreed quietly, "It’s simply murder.”
Cemetery Ridge

Chapter Summary

The Army of the Great Divide fights for its life on Cemetery Ridge.

Dusk had fallen. An afternoon had passed since the wave had wreaked its destruction upon the invaders, but it felt a lifetime to every soldier who contested the battlefield.

The Fire Nation line now extended along the length of Cemetery Ridge, for so Chieng had inadvertently christened it, and across the southern and eastern edges of the two nearby hillocks known as the Big and Little Round Tops. Four of the eleven tank trains had survived, a fifth, Solaria, had been caught in the crest of the wave at its zenith. She had lost all engine power and was deposited by the wave intact, but immobile, on the Big Round Top.

The surviving tank trains had been placed strategically along the line. Three lay broadside at the edge of Cemetery Ridge, allowing each a clear view of all approaches up the slope. General Xian's Leviathan, the Sozin's Comet, could be seen clearly on the Little Round Top. Solaria anchored the Big Round Top where she had come to rest.

The downslope of Cemetery Ridge lay thick with the drowned or exploded corpses of hundreds of Fire Nation tanks and thousands of Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation dead. Water from the wave trapped between the ridge and its lower neighbors lay in thick, rancid pools of muddy blood.

All afternoon the Earth Kingdom catapults and archers on the surrounding hills had pounded the Fire Nation positions. All afternoon the allied army had mounted charge after charge up the ridge towards the thin line of Fire Nation defenders. They never got close enough to launch their stones or, in many cases, for the Fire Nation tank gunners to engage.

The last rays of sunlight drained from the west as the stubborn earthbender columns moved up the slopes once again.

"Fire!" screamed Chieng, as if her will alone could rout the advancing enemy. She was filthy, exhausted and utterly refused to admit defeat. Her golden eyes glittered with anger and determination. Her hair, normally coiled tightly in a bun, had come loose and flailed wildly around her face as she shouted orders.

Behind her the gunners who manned the mighty flamethrowers atop the firing platforms complied.

Flaming jets of liquid naphtha arced across the sky from the massive siphons. Seconds later they rained down burning death on the round helmets of the Granite Mountain infantry. Screams of pain and rage erupted from those caught in the deadly shower. Burning men collapsed, trying desperately to shield their exposed flesh or burning armor, and rolled down the hill writhing in agony. The charge broke and the survivors scurried back down the slope.

Each charge had ended the same way. The first attempt had come closest to succeeding, but here, Chieng recollected with grim satisfaction, the enemy had finally been shown the raw power of her warforged children. Barely had the Army of the Great Divide dug in when the waterbenders of the north summoned from the rapidly retreating lake water half a dozen wide ice bridges. Masters of their
element, in seconds the blue clad warriors had connected the tops of the lower hills occupied by the Allies with the crest of Cemetery Ridge.

Glistening in the sun, the blue veined channels arched over several hundred feet each. Instantly allied soldiers had mounted each bridge, moving at double quick time to make contact with the disorganized enemy as fast as possible.

Corona, Sunrise, and Phoenix had opened up simultaneously, revealing to the world yet another Fire Nation technology of destruction. Under huge pressure, the liquid released from the siphons was ignited upon its exit, resulting in long, elegant arcs of flaming death. As the flamethrowers quickly covered the ice bridges in fire, a cheer rose amongst the Fire Nation ranks, the first of the day. Within minutes the ice bridges collapsed in a mass of melting ice, flame that water could not quench, and hundreds upon hundreds of allied soldiers who fell to their deaths.

As the afternoon waned and the battle continued to rage, the temperature on the bridge of the Corona became unbearable. The crew had long since taken off their uniform jackets and worked the controls in their undergarments. The stench of burnt flesh reeked in the stale and stifling air.

Chieng whirled on a breathless messenger who appeared behind her.

“What!” she demanded, her hoarse voice cracking.

“Commander! A message from the Comet and one from the Phoenix.”

“Xian’s first! What’s his reply?”

“He confirms the plan, Commander, and,” after a brief pause to catch his breath continued, “instructs that we begin the bombardment at the eleventh hour as you requested!”

Her expectation confirmed, she turned to survey the scarred terrain downslope once more. The observation port was dirty and covered in soot, but the Earth Kingdom lines on the opposing hillocks were plainly visible. Stern and sullen, the enemy had evidently been dissuaded from mounting another frontal assault. The landscape was littered with the remains of hundreds of Fire Nation tanks that had escaped the wave, but not the enemy. Flipped over, their bellies shattered by the impact of heavy stone, they resembled in the fading light the carcasses of some huge, extinct creature.

Pushing away guilt and shame once again she vowed silently, “Time, just give me a little more time…”

Her silent prayer offered, she turned again to the messenger.

“Phoenix?”

“Captain Hideo took two arrows through the lungs and died, Commander,” the messenger reported somberly, “their Chief Boiler Operator is in command and reports that their starboard siphon line has split. Their fuel tank on that side emptied before they detected the breech. At this rate of fire they’ll be dry in an hour.”

She eyed Corona’s own gauges briefly before replying, “Order the Solaria to drum out her reserve, get it over to Phoenix and fill their port tank. Send whatever’s left to the Sunrise. Go!”

It would have to suffice. Solaria couldn’t move anyway and there was no more fuel left to distribute. The messenger saluted smartly and disappeared through the spiral staircase that allowed access to the guts of the leviathan.
“Scope!”

At her command the sighting scope lowered itself silently from the roof down to eye level. She squinted through the eyepiece. The magnification and targeting hash marks allowed her to take the last measurements she needed. With just a few minutes left before darkness rendered the instrument useless, she carefully surveyed the enemy positions between Corona and the Round Tops.

“We have one chance to breakout,” she thought feverishly, “… one chance…we’re finished if we stay here…”

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Iroh’s friend and his makeshift platoon, now swollen by a few dozen survivors of other tanks, had taken cover in a shallow, but well forested ravine. After moving for hours and besting more than one enemy patrol the Fire Nation soldiers had sunk wearily to the muddy ground for a few minutes rest. They had at least successfully avoided the larger enemy formations and skirted around the many fortified positions which had continued to fire non-stop during their march.

Nikon observed his followers without emotion in the rapidly waning light. The tired, dirty soldiers he saw before him bore little resemblance to the bright eyed enthusiasts who had debarked months ago in the Gulf of Gela with little experience and boundless confidence. Instant success had swelled their pride and expectations of easy, glorious victory. This was understandable. Wasn’t victory the only possible outcome? They were young, the world was wide, and they were the Fire Lord’s finest.

Now, they looked hollow, vacant, and above all, defeated. They had seen the genius and power of the enemy with their own eyes and suffered in the comparison.

As they had trudged over the low lying hills they had seen the aftermath of the deluge play out before them. Within an hour the hills and vales above the wave crest were filled with the shattered remains of the Fire Nation tanks that survived the water, but had not kept up with the retreating tank trains. These unfortunates had been flipped over, their treads caked with mud that had slowed them down, and their bellies cracked wide open by the Earth Kingdom artillery that had been waiting patiently for them. Some crews had escaped their metal coffins before they were hit, some to join up with Nikon, others to disappear in the forested hills around them. The smashed bodies that hung grotesquely out of many however testified that most had died instantly.

Tien Shin’s words had resounded like thunder at each metal corpse they passed.

“You gave him four whole days to probe for weaknesses in our new weaponry! That’s what you’ve done!”

One wreck had been hit by a boulder so large that the stone had not shattered on impact. An arm and three legs stuck out from beneath the stone at terrifying angles.

“The shadow of death hangs over you for what you’ve done here,” Chieng’s voice rang in his head. She had proven prophetic.

Nikon passed judgment on himself in stony, impassive silence. The wave had done massive damage to be sure, but the enemy had used it to exploit a key weakness of the Fire Nation’s newest weapon. A weakness they had undoubtedly learned at Cam’ron. The realization came to him swiftly and suddenly.

“I am a traitor.”

He had the courage for suicide, that much he knew, but now was not the time for that luxury.
“No, not yet,” he thought coldly, but if he managed to get his charges to safety he knew that neither Xian nor Iroh could deter him from making the final atonement. He had failed them, the Fire Lord, and the Fire Nation. Tien Shin had been right about him all along.

“No, not yet,” he thought coldly, but if he managed to get his charges to safety he knew that neither Xian nor Iroh could deter him from making the final atonement. He had failed them, the Fire Lord, and the Fire Nation. Tien Shin had been right about him all along.

“On your feet everyone,” he said quietly, “We have to keep moving.”

“Where are we going, Commander? We don’t really know where we are,” Jin inquired without rancor.

“No,” Nikon admitted, but pointing toward the long slope that began to their north he replied, “but the enemy has been pounding that ridge all day. If the any part of the army has survived, that’s probably where they are.”

Suddenly the pretty young gunner, startled by her own reply, said, “Then why are we going there!? I don’t want to die!”

Jin grabbed her by the arm and hissed for her to lower her voice.

“No one does,” Nikon answered, “we’re going because our chances of getting out of here alive are much better if we do it together. How long do you think we will last out here on our own? We have no food, no equipment, nothing.”

“Let’s go,” he said when no reply was forthcoming, “there is no other way.”

Tien Shin regarded his commanding officer with undisguised contempt.

“You would surrender, General? Is this how you honor your father?”

They faced each other on the wooded crest of the Little Round Top. The General and his second in command had retreated to a small clearing behind the Comet and the ragged line of Fire Nation soldiers who watched and waited for the next enemy charge. The ground was littered with enemy arrows and dozens of impact craters. They were alone.

The wind blew hot and dry from the south as the sunlight faded. The daimyo’s red cloak flapped wildly, held in place by the black bow strapped across his back.

“No, Tien Shin,” Xian corrected in a broken voice that betrayed his expectation, “I will negotiate to buy time if this break out attempt fails.”

The last part of the General’s reply was partially drowned out by a nearby artillery impact that showered them both with dust and shards of stone. Both ignored the interruption, as well as the whistle of half a dozen arrows that planted themselves in the ground just a few feet away.

“You are weak, Xian,” the daimyo continued boldly, “and if you do this you will have earned the death and dishonor that are the inevitable wages of such cowardice.”

“There is nothing else to be done!” Xian cried, stung by the accusation and fearful that it was true.

“You are weak, Xian,” the daimyo continued boldly, “and if you do this you will have earned the death and dishonor that are the inevitable wages of such cowardice.”

“There is nothing else to be done!” Xian cried, stung by the accusation and fearful that it was true.

“Attack with everything we’ve got - now!” the daimyo countered hotly, as if speaking to a child, “The cavalry must be sent into the downs immediately! The archers must cover them! Then the tank trains can spearhead the armor back out! Damn you, it’s our only chance!”

“No!” Xian roared back, “You propose to sacrifice those men, leaving the cavalry and archers to die
while we escape! And you speak to me of dishonor? The archers are your own men!"

“I speak of turning certain death for all into a chance for life for as many as we can hope to save,” the prince replied coldly.

“You speak fluently of murder and with such ease!” Xian retorted, his eyes haunted pits of misery, “I am tired of murder! And tired of soulless murderers like you who have turned our country into a filthy sink of corruption and dishonor! Men like you who have turned our hearts against one another and made us pitiless as stone! We were supposed to bring peace, prosperity and civilization to the world! Look now at what we have become!”

Xian’s words hung heavily in the air.

Tien Shin studied Xian for a moment before replying softly, “You speak treason, Prince Xian, and have lost your right to command.”

Iroh’s cousin stiffened, realizing his mistake, “You have your orders, Tien Shin! You are dismissed. Do as I have instructed and I will forget the insult you have just given.”

Xian turned from his subordinate without another word.

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Nifong pursed his lips tightly as he lowered his sight glass. Doomed as they were, the remaining Fire Nation forces had fortified the western hills with iron discipline. The Earth Kingdom’s frontal attacks had been costly, but necessary to pin down the rump of the Fire Nation army now fighting for its life.

“They’re dug in, General,” his aide observed, “They cleaned out our positions on the hills behind them, so they have a tight front line. It’ll take days to flank them. Or we could just lay siege and starve them out.”

"Yes, the enemy is resourceful. I have a solution for that problem, though,” he vowed without a trace of satisfaction. “Please transmit these instructions to Colonel Liu.”

The green clad general handed a scroll, still fresh with ink and sand, to the Captain.

His aide scanned the document quickly, “Tonight, then?”

“Yes,” Nifong replied grimly, “tonight.”
Nikon and Chieng struggle to survive as the Earth Kingdom trap slams shut.

Nikon crested the ridge amidst the deafening impacts of falling stone. Bright arcs of liquid fire streamed across the rapidly darkening sky. Dimly he could make out the black shapes, darker than night, of the steel leviathans that anchored the Army of the Great Divide’s final defense against the united armies of the Earth Kingdom and Northern Water Tribe.

“Oh, thank the Elements!” exclaimed the pretty young gunner, tears welling unbidden in her dark eyes.

“We’re not out of this yet, girl,” Jin replied ominously.

“Shut up, Jin!” she retorted miserably, “You’re just a nasty…”

The crown prince’s friend, filthy and ragged, absently waved off their bickering with a single curt command, “Enough.”

The makeshift platoon streamed into the clearing behind the nearest tank train. Two sentries charged them out of the gloom only to stop short, recognizing another group of Fire Nation stragglers. The ground about them was littered with impact craters and hundreds of green feathered arrows protruded from the broken earth.

“Name! Rank!” barked the closest, his fists raised and his legs spread wide in a classic fire bending stance. The other gripped the hilt of a dagger hung from his belt.


Hesitating only a moment longer, the sentry dropped his stance and saluted smartly. His companion instantly followed suit.

“Hail, Commander!”

“What is the situation? Is General Xian alive? Which tank train is this?” the former brigade leader asked in rapid fire.

“Not good, Commander,” the firebender sentry replied, obviously exhausted, “We’re trapped up here. We’ve got some of the archers and cavalry, but most of the armors’ gone and a lot of the tank trains…,” then grimacing as he continued, “The men are calling this place Cemetery Ridge.”

Another impact interrupted them, this one right behind the sentries.

“Prince Xian?” Nikon prompted after the ejecta settled.

“He’s alive, sir, on the Little Round Top – that hill over there,” he said, pointing to the northeast,
“though you can’t really see it now.”

“I see,” then gritting his teeth he continued, “…and… Chieng?”

The sentry smiled in reply, pride swelling his chest, “Magnificent, Commander. That’s the Corona behind us. We’d be gone for certain by now if it weren’t for her. With all due respect, sir, I think she’s the toughest soldier in the whole Fire Nation.”

Nikon paused before making a reply. Briefly he allowed himself to wonder at the man’s obvious devotion to the foul-mouthed engineer. He had misjudged her after all.

“You are probably right, soldier. She’s earned my respect. I must call on your Commander now. Take these survivors,” he ordered with a gesture to his makeshift platoon behind him, “to the camp commander and deploy them as he sees fit.”

The sentries saluted at the instruction.

“You,” Nikon said, indicating the sentry who had not spoken, “Hand me your dagger, please.”

The sentry saluted again and complied. Nikon hung the dagger from his belt and began to turn away.

“Commander,” Jin protested, “Permission to remain with…”

“No, Jin,” the defeated brigade leader replied tonelessly, “I am no longer your Commander. You have fought with honor, all of you,” he said to the larger group as the dusk finally turned to night, “and I release you to serve those who are better suited to lead than I who have failed you so badly.”

Shocked, his soldiers remained silent.

“That is all.”

Nikon saluted stiffly and turned away without another word.

The Corona loomed ever larger, a sinister shadow in the smoke filled night. The great siphons, discharging bright jets of flaming naptha on their antagonists, had gone silent only moments before. Nikon stopped short in the sweltering darkness as his companions were herded away. Moments later only the sounds of bombardment could be heard, the clearing temporarily deserted.

“Move,” Nikon ordered himself.

As if in a nightmare his legs responded sluggishly, the space between him and the entrance to the Corona seeming to grow longer even as he approached. Finally he mounted the steps leading up to the hatch, his footsteps ringing audibly against the bare metal. Nikon opened the door and stepped inside.

Hot, stale, reeking air blasted Nikon’s senses as he entered, but he barely noticed. Neither did he register the wounded lying about on the deck, many crying softly in pain, nor the unhurt crewmen working their controls in soiled undergarments. No one acknowledged his entrance beyond a few strained glances.

Clear as a bell he heard the voice of the woman he sought ringing from the control deck above him. He looked over to where the spiral staircase ascended to an open hatch in the ceiling. Nikon climbed as her voice died away.

Chieng stood erect, her back to Nikon as he emerged, frozen in a defiant pose with her hands on her
hips. Her body was neatly silhouetted against the large observation port through which she studied the battlefield. In the distance several streaks of brilliant orange arced through the sky, framing her head in a wreath of luminescent gold beads. Grim and silent, she could have been the Fire Lord himself. Nikon thought in a distant part of his mind that he had never seen a more beautiful woman. Devoid as it was of desire, the sentiment felt alien and cold, but possessed of the certainty of truth, as though he had been first to discover a law of nature.

Nikon turned slightly to see the source of the jets. Two tank trains, small in the distance, lay broadside on two nearby hills. Their mighty siphons poured beautiful streams of liquid fire on ranks of rapidly retreating assailants, their green uniforms reduced to black or grey in the darkness. The siphons winked out as the attackers completed their withdrawal. The tactical situation became instantly clear.

The observation port went dark. Chieng remained motionless.

“You were right,” he began without preamble.

She did not respond.

“You were right…,” he repeated, “…and Tien Shin was right.”

“About what?” she queried softly without turning.

“Cam’ron.”

“You blame yourself for this situation then,” she stated simply.

Nikon lowered his gaze to the floor and replied, “I hear they’re calling this place Cemetery Ridge. They haven’t seen the rest of the battlefield then. Every hill within ten miles is a cemetery – stinking heaps of wreckage and the broken bodies of our men.”

The silence hung between them for a few moments before Nikon pressed on.

“You saw how they did it now, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes I see now. The belly armor,” she replied dully.

“He sacrificed his men at Cam’ron to learn our weaknesses. I gave him what he wanted.”

Chieng did not reply. Another streak of orange illuminated the night sky and then vanished, leaving a trail of glowing red cinders that wafted slowly down in its wake.

Iroh’s friend took a deep breath and concluded, “Yes, I blame myself.”

She turned to him then, her face impassive. She noticed briefly how his hand rested on the hilt of the dagger at his belt. His countenance was devastated. Only the angularity of his face and the regularity of his features showed him to be the same young rake she’d first met months ago on the observation deck of the Sulaco.

“I understand that if there is any chance at all for survival it’s because of you. You saved Iroh at Nomura, you saved me at Cam’ron. I never thanked you as I should have. For what it’s worth, I wanted to thank you now for doing what I couldn’t in this… this god awful place.”

“And what is that?”

“For turning death into a fighting chance for life. Thank you.”
After a moment’s pause Nikon abruptly saluted, turned and left the way he came.

She watched him descend the stairs, gathering speed as he went. Moments later she heard the exit hatch clang shut beneath her. She turned quickly to the observation port. Wisps of reeking smoke rose from the hills, many of which still burned, but the battle had subsided for the moment. Only the occasional impact of Earth Kingdom artillery broke the silence. She read the chronometer on the scope control panel; a little over an hour still until the planned counterattack.

Her decision made, Chieng activated the intercom under the observation port and called for the Chief Boiler Operator.

“Yes, Commander?”

“I’m going to see Xian! Take command until I return!”

“Yes, sir!”

Graceful as a dancer Chieng bounded over to the staircase and slid down the curved handrail all the way to the bottom. Seconds later she exited the stifling interior of her leviathan and into the clearing, now illuminated by a waxing moon that cast the landscape in a ghostly pallor. Somewhere close she could hear the camp commander issuing orders to troops on the front line. Of Nikon there was no trace. The trampled paths leading out of the clearing were empty.

Two sentries came round the farther end of the Corona. Both saluted and stood to attention when they recognized their Commander.

Chieng returned the salute with steely eyes.

“Why weren’t you at your posts?” she burst out menacingly.

“We were ordered by Commander Nikon to take the stragglers he brought with him to the Camp Commander, sir!”

“That is a one person job, Sergeant, and having both sentries retire from their posts without proper relief is a violation of your fifth general order!”

The sentry looked aghast, for of course she was correct. Both dropped to their knees and bowed their heads in shame.

“Yes, Commander, we beg your forgiveness.”

“I don’t have time for this!” she exclaimed with an angry wave, “I will deal with you later. Right now I need to know where Nikon went! He just left Corona – did you see him?”

The sentries looked at each other quickly before the Sergeant replied, pointing to backside of the ridge, “We’re not sure, Commander, but we saw someone going that direction –“

Chieng ran westward, leaving her men to gape at their Commander’s sudden and urgent departure.

She stopped the dagger in mid sweep as it plunged downward to Nikon’s chest.

“No! No! You will not!” she screamed into Nikon’s ear.
With one hand Chieng twisted the dagger out of Nikon’s grip and with the other she slapped him hard across the face. With a cry of anguish she spun and slammed the hilt of the dagger into his chest, knocking him to the ground.

Stunned, Nikon blinked up at her. One moment he was alone, prepared to atone for the loss of his men’s lives with his own, the next he was doubled over on the ground facing the full fury of Liu Shiung’s daughter.

“What do you think you’re doing, you jackass!?” she cried in frustration, her chest heaving with the exertion.

Nikon could only clutch his throbbing chest in response.

Her eyes brimmed as she watched his struggle to breathe and finally spilled over, tears cascading down her cheeks.

“Do you really think you are the only one responsible for this!? I swear you are the first man I’ve ever met who excelled me in arrogance! It was a trap – right from the start! Just as you and Gan said it was! You aren’t responsible for stripping off the belly armor – that… that was my decision. So now I ask myself, if I’ve saved anyone, was it only to give them up here on the bloody shores of Lake Myojin?!”

“No!” she answered herself resolutely, “No! I’m not committing suicide now and neither are you! No matter how much we might want to! Not yet! Not while our people still have the will to fight! Not while Xian and Iroh need us! Yes, Nikon, Xian and Iroh – are you really so stupid to think that they are better off with you dead!?”

Nikon hesitated to reply, shame, guilt and shock retarding his response.

“Answer me!” she thundered.

“I failed them… my brigade is gone… why…” he began lamely.

Chieng bent down on one knee, put the palm of her hand on his shoulder and said, “Agni help me, but you’re the best they’ve got! And so am I! Get over Cam’ron! Xian and Iroh need you! They need us! Our soldiers need us! Our nation needs us! They need us to put forth all our skill, all our effort, and all our power to help turn this around - now!”

“We’re going to go on, Nikon,” the curt engineer vowed, her golden eyes aflame, “no matter how much it shames us! I don’t know yet how, but before we are through with this life we are going to redeem ourselves with the blood of the Army of the Granite Mountains!”

Nikon stared at her in wonder, finally understanding the devotion of the soldiers to the tank train commander.

“You are amazing, Chieng,” he confessed quietly with open admiration, “the Spirit of the Sun burns brighter in you than any firebender I’ve ever known.”

Chieng blinked in surprise at the genuine praise, though her expression lost none of its ferocity.

“All right,” he finally replied with a small smile, “how are we going to do that?

“I said I don’t know yet, dumbass!” she retorted impatiently, ignoring his compliment, “But right now we’re going to see Xian. I promised Iroh I’d keep you alive – and since you obviously need a keeper that means we go to Xian, because I’m sure as hell not babysitting you! Now move!”
Against his will Nikon broke into a broad grin. Her fiery exhortation and display of willpower had reawakened in him the desire to fight; he’d see it through to the end, but it was clear she wouldn’t take his word for it.

Nikon rose and followed Chieng into the darkness.
The fall of Prince Xian.

They sped north along the spine of Cemetery Ridge in a commandeered tank, a survivor of one of Tien Shin’s brigades. The driving distance between the Corona and the Comet was no more than a few minutes, but it allowed Nikon the opportunity to survey the Fire Nation lines on his right as they passed. The moon had risen high over the Ping Tou mountains, casting weird shadows from their lofty peaks upon the ridges and foothills below.

Earth kingdom artillery continued to shell the Fire Nation positions, but much less frequently than earlier in the day. The solitary, staccato impacts felt random. The explosions echoed hollowly off the hills and went unanswered by the Fire Lord’s finest. Occasionally a flight of arrows would whistle for a split second overhead before hitting its mark or burying itself in the ground. Impassive, silent, and exhausted, the red clad invaders manned their tanks or scanned the enemy lines from their hastily dug trenches, for the mongoose cavalry had dismounted to dig in once the defensive perimeter had been set.

Sentries and returning pickets saluted as Nikon and Chieng as they passed. Suddenly the enormous bulk of the Sunrise reared up before them, flames crowning the barrels of the twin siphons mounted on her roof, and quickly fell astern as they raced into the night.

Minutes ago Nikon had been prepared to end his life. Redeeming one’s honor for such a devastating failure demanded suicide. Every Fire Nation officer knew this. Yet Chieng’s words echoed in his ears and not for the first time. He couldn’t deny that he was happy to be alive, once again riding one of the machines he knew in his heart he was born to command. The blunt engineer had been right – better to go down fighting in the vain hope of redemption rather than kill yourself and end all hope of it. Likely as they were to die in this battle, Nikon’s heart felt lighter than it ever had since he parted with Iroh weeks before.

Flaming jets of orange sprang to life on their right, immediately identifying the Phoenix.

“Chieng,” Nikon said, speaking loudly into the voice pipe that passed the tank commander’s orders to the compartment below, “We passed Sunrise and we’re passing Phoenix now, so we should be headed down into the ravines between the ridge and the Little Round Top very shortly.”

“Acknowledged,” came the curt reply from below.

Chieng was perfectly comfortable driving a tank, but not taking guidance from Nikon. He grinned at her discomfort.

As the tank crashed into the first ravine however the striking image of Chieng standing in front of Corona’s observation port filled his mind. Unbidden he recalled her former title, “Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces.” What the hell did that mean? She had just saved his life, and proven herself in a dozen other ways over the past few months, yet besides her inventive genius and foul temper he knew next to nothing about her. He felt a touch of shame, an all too familiar emotion of late.
“Am I actually growing up?” He thought wistfully, and then with a touch of a smile, “Iroh and Gan will be disappointed.”

Suddenly they began to climb and a new shadow appeared above them. Two wisps of orange flame atop the shadow identified it as the next Fire Nation leviathan in the line.

“Sozin’s Comet ahead,” he radioed below.

The engine revved high as Chieng shifted into lower gears to maintain speed up the slope. Nikon ducked to avoid a low tree branch right before the machine crested the western lip of the Little Round Top.

They entered a narrow clearing. The Sozin’s Comet lay ahead and to their right. A couple Fire Nation soldiers carrying lanterns were running towards the Comet while several others ran across their path in the opposite direction.

The soldiers running to the Comet stopped and began excitedly waving down Nikon’s tank. As the tank drew near the runners Nikon recognized the nearest as one of Prince Xian’s adjutants. His white hair and wizened, careworn features marked him as the elder of the two “map buddies.” A lifetime had passed since the tank commander last saw him.

“Commander!” the old soldier cried hoarsely.

Nikon waved him closer and the adjutant swiftly mounted the tank. His companion paused briefly before continuing on towards the Sozin’s Comet.

“Commander, please follow the medics right away,” he pleaded, pointing in the direction of the Fire Nation soldiers rapidly heading away from the Comet.

“Why? I have to see General Xian immediately.”

“Yes, Commander, but that’s why you got to go with them! Please,” the adjutant begged, “you’ve got to go now! They’ll need help to move him!”

Nikon stopped short in his reply as the lantern light revealed the tears glistening on the old soldier’s face.

“What’s happened?” Nikon inquired sharply, his chest tightening instantly.

“Prince Xian is wounded… badly… go to him now, please!” the old man said through tears, “I have to get word to the daimyo!”

The adjutant saluted once more and disappeared into the darkness.

Nikon dismounted the tank and landed heavily on the ground. Chieng followed close behind. Together they ran towards the dimly lit figures ahead. Two Fire Nation soldiers stood holding lanterns. Two others knelt beside a prostrate figure.

“What’s going on?” Nikon bellowed as he rushed up to them, anger masking his fear, “Who’s in charge here!”

No one replied. Nikon heard Chieng’s sharp intake of breath as the wounded figure came into view. The body of the Fire Lord’s nephew lay broken on the dirt before them. Green feathered arrows
sprang from his neck and torso.

“Looks like enemy pickets, Commander,” one of the medics finally offered, indicating the arrows.

Nikon ignored the comment. The “how” didn’t matter now. Xian was dying.

The prince breathed still, but the wind rattled in his chest. Xian’s eyes searched out the newcomer. He smiled at Nikon, recognition blooming on his face through the pain. The mortally wounded general looked younger than Iroh’s friend ever remembered him.

Bitter tears leapt from Nikon’s eyes at the sight.

“No! No!” Nikon screamed shrilly.

He dropped to his knees, closed his eyes in grief and reached for the fallen prince’s hand, “You can’t go! Please!”

Through the tears Nikon felt the dying man grasp his outstretched hand. He looked up at Xian. Blood poured through the prince’s teeth and down his cheeks as he tried to speak, but failed. A few bloody bubbles grew out of the prince’s mouth, popped, and slid down the side of his face.

Pain contorting his once gentle features, Xian tried in vain with his other hand to give Nikon the baton granted him by the Fire Lord. It fell, sticky with the dying man’s blood, to the ground. He could see the fallen prince mouthing his cousin’s name, but no sound emerged.

Nikon froze for a moment, but then, his benefactor’s intention finally dawning on him, picked up the bloody symbol of power.

Seeing the silent plea in Xian’s eyes, Nikon tightened his grip on his hand and swore in a choked voice, “I promise! I promise, my lord! I’ll find a way! But, please, please don’t…”

He stopped as Xian’s head fell to the side, his eyes still wide open. The spirit of the gentle prince had fled.

Nikon bowed his head in despair, tears dripping from his face.

He felt Chieng drop to her knees beside him.

“Rest now, Prince,” Chieng beseeched, her voice uncharacteristically circumspect as she closed the eyes of the lifeless general, “Too gentle for the task, too noble for this age of blood and iron, in a better world… you would have shined bright.”
Apocalypse Now!

Chapter Summary

The Battle of Lake Myojin concludes and we finally see the audience's reaction to the great Earth Kingdom victory.

The banquet hall fell silent as the storyteller inclined his head at the passing of General Nifong’s great adversary.

Grief, as fresh as the moment he had learned of his cousin’s death, washed over Iroh. Heedless now of the danger, tears coursed freely down his cheeks. The audience, however, mesmerized by the performance, had failed to notice the retired general’s anguish.

The quiet was suddenly broken by the huge and unmistakable sound of someone blowing his nose. The great honking noise, echoing off the hardwood surfaces of the gallery, startled many of the guests, all of whom quickly turned their attention to the predictable source of the disturbance.

“Oh Gao, that was wonderful!” bawled the merchant of Shanxi as he once more evacuated his proboscis. The silk handkerchief he used was heavily embroidered with pearls and it fluttered like a flag in a stiff breeze each time he used it.

Trimazu lowered the handkerchief to reveal tear streaked jowls. Whether they were tears of joy or sorrow no one could tell.

“Truly that is the best retelling of Lake Myojin that I can ever remember!” boomed the merchant, his voice thick with emotion.

“Oh, the Weeping Whale has spoken!” Chen Ho injected before draining his glass and motioning to a servant for a refill.

Ignoring his neighbor’s scorn the fat man continued to address the storyteller in his conspiratorial tone, “I swear you might even be worth the outrageous amount of money you’re extorting from me to entertain these people!”

Shifting his bulk he expelled another mighty blast into the beautiful square of fabric that had been rapidly reduced to a filthy snot rag.

Gao smiled and offered the merchant a deep obeisance.

“You honor me, Lord!”

“Oh yes, I’m honoring you all the way to the poor house, my friend! But…” the party’s outrageous host then stood, spread his arms wide, and cried, “I ask my honored guests, is the great Gao Xingjian not worth every gold piece I am paying him? Does the Master Storyteller not live up to his illustrious reputation?”

The guests responded instantly with a single shout of approval and began to clap thunderously. The storyteller’s eyes swept the room, for he knew he had captured his audience, and proceeded to bow once to each table of guests.
Trimazu motioned for the servants to bring Gao his chair. Clearly the storyteller had earned some refreshment.

“The bard has indeed done well,” Chen Ho remarked grudgingly as the clapping began to subside and the audience began to buzz with conversation, “but do you really feel the need to blubber over the corpse of a Fire Nation villain, Trimazu? I don’t expect anything more from this fool here,” he said, waving his hand dismissively at Iroh, “but you should know better. I at least thought you a patriot. The death of an enemy is cause for celebration, not tears.”

Zuko glowered at the insult to his guardian, but his outward countenance remained as impassive as it had throughout the narration of the disaster. He knew the outline of the history from his tutors, and his uncle had referenced it occasionally as a cautionary tale. Since the banished prince considered defeats dishonorable however he had never wanted, nor been encouraged, to study the event closely. His heart seethed with anger and shame as the tale had unfolded and he silently vowed revenge on the green clad people before him.

“Not so, dear neighbor,” Trimazu disagreed, his expression serious for the first time since the carriage ride, “tragedy should be lamented no matter the color of the clothing worn by its victims – all the more so if they have brought their fate upon themselves. Is that not the very essence of tragedy?”

“As a sophisticated and educated gentleman,” he continued, pausing to punctuate his remark with a thunderous belch, “I have no trouble separating pity for the fall of a doomed man and the slaughter of individual soldiers from gladness that the fascists were crushed and pride in the victory of our countrymen and allies!”

The fat man seated himself and blew his nose obscenely once more.

“I don’t agree either, Lord Ho,” Governor Tao remarked, flatly ignoring his host’s robust flatulence, “Haven’t you learned anything from this war? Maybe you haven’t lost anyone dear to you. I have lost four sons and two brothers. Death should never be celebrated. Victory, always, but death? Never.”

“Well spoken, my friend,” Trimazu boomed in agreement, his expression brightening to its customary ebullience. Turning slightly the merchant addressed Iroh with a wave of his jewel festooned hand, “and Xian here has once again proven wiser than you, Chen Ho, though I daresay that’s not hard!”

“As if the opinion of this ignorant commoner matters,” the gray haired noble retorted coldly.

“Those “ignorant commoners” defend your estates, Lord Ho,” Tao rebuked sternly, “Remember that.”

The former governor turned to address Iroh.

“What do you say, Xian?”

“Yes!” the merchant injected, “Pay no attention to my neighbor’s embarrassing lack of manners! He would do well to take after my example, but, alas, he is ever so stubborn.”

Trimazu leaned in towards Iroh, his glance suddenly keen.

“So, tell us, my friend, do you lament the death of your Fire Nation namesake? Or are those tears of joy for the Army of the Granite Mountains’ awesome victory?”
The banished prince was startled to see his uncle’s tears, though Iroh had done his best to wipe them away while the merchant addressed his guests. Realizing the danger, Zuko furtively scanned the faces of the people around him, instantly alert to the possibility of discovery. Anger and thirst for revenge drained away, quickly replaced by anxiety and fear. He knew they could fight their way out if the situation dictated, but it would be bloody, dangerous and the entire province would soon be after them.

While Zuko waited in quiet desperation, Iroh steeled himself to meet his host’s eyes. Drawing upon a lifetime of discipline, the retired general smiled and replied to the question with complete honesty.

“Truly, Lord, I am... just... moved by the master storyteller’s tremendous gifts. Your fortune is truly well spent.”

The master of the house hesitated only a moment before he smiled wider than ever and clapped Iroh’s shoulder once again.

“It is, Xian, it is!” he thundered, “I cannot tell you how gratified I am that at least one of my guests appreciates the enormous expense I am incurring on his behalf!”

“And that is of course the main point,” Chen Ho observed caustically, “why don’t you just go ahead and tell us how much you’re paying him, Trimazu? We all know you want to.”

A few nearby guests tittered at this, for truer words had never been spoken.

“I completely understand your curiosity, good neighbor,” the fat man responded, pouncing on the opportunity, “but that would be dreadfully boorish, don’t you agree? Truly, I am shocked and ashamed that the patriarch of the noble Ho family would ask such a vulgar question.”

The bloated merchant smiled innocently. Chen Ho looked ill and excused himself, presumably to visit the restroom. Tao Lin shook his head in disbelief, shielding his eyes with his hand while Trimazu chortled quietly in satisfaction.

Iroh’s nephew exhaled, barely aware that he had held his breath. The moment of danger apparently passed, he quietly observed his uncle with concern. Xian had died long before Zuko was born and as a defeated general his name was not spoken in the Fire Lord’s household. Only now could Zuko see how much his uncle had loved his cousin.

He found himself pitying Iroh for his loss and himself for his own loneliness. His uncle had loved and been loved both by friends and family. Zuko had loved only his mother and she was gone. Zuko fought down a surge of jealousy and despair. Ugly and unanswerable questions rose unbidden to torture him in the deep places of his mind.

Why can’t father see in me what grandfather saw in uncle? Why can’t Azula and I have a bond like uncle had with Xian or his friends? What is wrong with me? Why can’t I get anything right?

At that moment a servant rushed up to the master of the house.

“Forgive me, your Hugeness, but the storyteller is ready to continue!”

With a start the fat man turned his attention to the center of the room. Gao stood ready, his chair removed, the audience rapidly falling silent.

“Of course!” he said smartly, with a single clap of his hands, “Enough farting around, Gao! I guess it’s about time for poor old Iroh to get the bad news, eh?”
Iroh closed his eyes, steeling himself against another display that could jeopardize his young nephew. He knew this time he would not yield.

“Indeed, Lord, we have but one episode to relate before the Crown Prince hears tell of our great victory, for the battle of Lake Myojin does not conclude with the death of Iroh’s ill-fated cousin. Hear now esteemed guests of the final downfall of the Fire Lord’s mighty armored legions…”

The audience cheered.

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Nikon and Chieng stood up slowly. The others remained frozen in place around the body of their former leader.

“Stay with him,” Iroh’s friend commanded, “We’re going to find the daimyo, he must know immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” the medic replied, “he was on the Comet when we came here.”

Nikon and Chieng remounted their machine and drove at top speed towards the Sozin’s Comet, clearly visible in the distance.

Without warning the Comet suddenly sprang to life. Running lights switched on and the sound of its engines could be heard clearly over the background noise of the low intensity bombardment. Slowly, but with quickly gathering speed, she mounted the crest of the Little Round Top. The Fire Nation tanks around her quickly did the same.

“What the hell?” came Chieng’s shocked voice from below.

Moments later a gathering chant rose from the ranks of the enemy and the sounds of intense battle broke out on their left. Solaria’s siphons sprang to life, her flamethrowers illuminating the battlefield around the Big Round Top, for she was aiming direct fire almost immediately in front of her. The slopes of this northeastern most hill were swarming with Earth Kingdom soldiers. Closer still they could see rank upon rank of the enemy cresting the Little Round Top no more than a few thousand feet away from them.

“Dear Agni! A night attack – we’re in trouble!” Nikon reported into the speaker tube.

“Right – the daimyo must be moving to support, but I don’t underst –” Chieng’s thought was never completed.

The agonizing sounds of grinding metal began to echo across the battlefield, as if some massive edifice of iron were swaying back and forth in a gale.

Chieng’s eyes bulged in horror as Solaria, glorious, proud and illuminated like a Sun Festival sparkler, began to tip over in silent slow motion. The sound of her impact as she tumbled down the southern slope of the Big Round Top was earth shattering. Many of the attacking formations simply disappeared in the wake of her death throes. After several barrel rolls her siphons winked out, but her belly split wide open in twisted agony. Huge gouts of liquid spewed forth from her innards and exploded. Open flame now engulfed everything within reach. The Big Round Top was instantly transformed into the visage of an active volcano.

Just as the uproar from Solaria’s ignominious death subsided, the awful sound of grinding metal began anew, this time from their right.
“They’re earthbending the ground underneath the tank trains!” Nikon roared in frustration.

“We have to evacuate now! No option!”

Without instruction Chieng yanked the yolk rightwards and cranked the engine to full speed, driving them back towards Cemetery Ridge.

“What the hell are you doing!?!” Nikon thundered while steadying himself against the sudden lurch starboard.

“We’re finished here, Tien Shin knows it! He’s trying to break out with the Comet. We have to do the same!”

Ahead they could already see the Sunrise teetering at the edge of the ridge line, her siphons firing continually downslope. Her engines roared to life as her crew tried desperately to escape.

Moments later they arrived at the Phoenix, where men were hurriedly mounting their mongoose and tanks. The Phoenix’s flamethrowers were silent as her position remained as yet unassailed.

“You take the Phoenix, Captain Hideo is dead anyway! Ha Chang is Chief Boiler Operator – he’s good, let him run the train. Get her over to Corona and bring as much of the army as you can with you!”

Nikon swiftly agreed. In one fluid motion he swung his legs out of the machine and jumped down, Xian’s baton still gripped in his hand.

Without turning he heard the slow, thunderous crash and the massive explosion that signaled the final destruction of the Sunrise. The center of Cemetery Ridge burst into flame, black smoke rising in a massive column to the heavens, blotting out the stars.

Chieng’s tank sped south in a desperate race to save her last child.

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“So, esteemed guests, ended the glorious Battle of Lake Myojin,” Gao concluded triumphantly, the audience cheering once again.

“Tien Shin, Nikon Orlando and Chieng Shiung did indeed escape with their surviving dreadnoughts, though in the interest of time we will touch only lightly on their return to Prince Iroh, but a more complete victory has never been won as on that day.”

“Indeed, the Army of the Granite Mountains was completely unprepared for the scale of the victory. The next day the winds freshened once again, completely lifting the milky veil that had obscured the slaughter, and in the clear morning light hills and shore revealed to their eyes the undeniable and terrifying truth that the Fire Nation army had been totally destroyed...”
He saw them approaching from a great distance, the heat of the last days of summer rising in great hazy waves off the plains. Two distinct dust trails sped toward them at great speed. Behind them a few dozen lesser trails indicated a small escort.

Prince Iroh stood impassively, his eyes locked on the approaching machines, his muscles stiff with days of tension. The battle should have been joined days before, but the scouts had reported no activity in the pass on the appointed day, or the following day, or even the day after that.

The machines grew steadily larger as he watched. They had not come from the southern pass. They had come from above the northern spur. How they achieved this feat he did not know, but that so few approached was very nearly proof enough of the disaster he felt sure had befallen. The approaching column was small, but Iroh felt sure it carried the spirits of many and he could almost hear their voices, the sounds of battle, and the screams of dying men.

He had not changed out of his armor since the since the day the battle was supposed to take place. He stank horribly. Repeatedly he searched in vain through his sight glass for signs of fire in the pass. He saw nothing. Each day passed in agony.

In his right hand he carried Xian’s black swathed missive, a smooth, silent harbinger of death. He hated it, but could not help but look upon it whenever he was not scanning the horizon.

A crunch of pebbles from behind alerted him to the presence of his one remaining friend.

“Two tank trains, your Highness,” Gan reported, one eye squinting through his sight glass.

“Yes,” Iroh acknowledged dully.

“And about ten or twenty tanks at most,” he added with some bitterness.

Gan retracted the instrument and replaced it in his tunic.

Iroh turned away, resolved to receive the approaching visitors at the camp. There was nothing to do but wait and steel himself against the inevitable. The Qu’ai Tau put a hand on the Crown Prince’s shoulder to stop him.

“Your Highness,” he began, unable to meet Iroh’s eyes, “I…”

“No!” Iroh roared suddenly, thrusting his friends hand away roughly, “I won’t hear it!”

Gan let his hand fall back to his side.

“You don’t know a damn thing!” thundered Iroh, shaking his fists at his friend. Tears welled, but did not fall.
The man in grey remained silent, his eyes downcast, sadness etched on his face.

Iroh marched stiffly to the command tent, the pennants of the Crown Prince snapping in the wind.

The black cylinder grew heavy in his hand.

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The Phoenix finally began to slow, the constant pounding of her engines and high pitched shrieking of her treads waning as they approached the Fire Nation encampment. Six days had passed since the battle of Lake Myojin. Six days since the death of Prince Xian. Six days since the world had fallen to pieces.

Nikon had not come to terms with his own grief. The catastrophic loss on the shores of the cursed lake had instantly transformed into a desperate retreat up and over the Ping Tou. Corona and Phoenix had fought many actions, two in snow and ice at extreme elevation, before descending the sharp western slopes of the range. They had escaped only because the Earth Kingdom vanguard contained no waterbenders to manipulate the vast reservoirs of frozen water that blanketed the mountains. Many of the tanks which had escaped with them were lost to the terrain or cannibalized for their fuel to enable the rest to move on.

When they had not been in combat he could only think of what he must do if he lived to see Iroh again.

What do I tell him?

How can I tell him?

Why has it fallen to me to bear him this awful thing?

There were no answers. Briefly he regretted Chieng’s intervention on his behalf. He had not expected to survive, only to die with some kind of honor. Instead he found himself returning in disgrace to tell his best friend that his beloved cousin was dead and that much of the army was destroyed.

The red baton, still stained with the blood of its previous bearer, gleamed dully in Nikon’s hand.

The warforged titan slowed to a crawl as it entered the camp. On either side an honor guard lined the approach, flags held high. Iroh’s tent and the tank train car that Chieng had loaned him after the Battle of Nomura lay ahead. Nikon could see the entire officer corps of the infantry formed into rank and file. At the center he saw his friend. Next to him a man in grey could only be Gan.

“Kill drive engines,” he commanded tonelessly.

The Chief complied and the Phoenix slowed to a stop.

Nikon rapped twice on the side hatch before it opened, revealing the Crown Prince and the remainder of the Army of the Great Divide. He stepped out onto the running board. Dimly he could hear Corona grinding to a halt behind the Phoenix. The bodies of both dreadnoughts were heavily damaged, the symbols and lettering of their names, once resplendent in gold and red, now barely legible.

Iroh locked eyes with his best friend. The devastation he found there told him all he needed. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing back the tears. It was a moment before he trusted himself to open them again without shame.
The acting captain of the Phoenix descended, stepping heavily onto the dust of the Nasu Plain. He approached Iroh under the tense and watchful gaze of the infantry officers. The red baton he held attracted every eye.

“Hail, Prince Iroh!”

Nikon saluted and dropped to one knee.

“Greetings, Commander Orlando,” Azulon’s son managed, his voice stilted, threatening to crack, “I thank the Spirit of the Sun for your safe return.”

Chieng emerged from the Corona and stood beside the young tank commander. Without a word she dropped to her knees next to him.

“Greetings, Commander Shiung,” the Crown Prince continued, gratefully acknowledging her presence by placing a hand on her shoulder, “Your return is a blessing as well, and I am thankful that you have once again fulfilled your promise.”

“What promise, Highness?” she asked dully, unable to meet his eyes.

“You didn’t let this one die on me,” Iroh replied gently, though his eyes remained filled with sorrow.

Chieng did not reply, unwilling to take credit even though she had earned it. The guilt of responsibility for the deaths of so many loyal soldiers, her commanding general, and all but two of her children oppressed her.

Iroh knew it was his responsibility to demand an account, but it was hard, perhaps the hardest thing he had done in his life. He hesitated, the wind picking up dust and dirt as it whipped through the camp. Finally, he spoke.

“Commander… what has happened? Where are General Xian and the rest of the army?”

Nikon looked up to meet his friend’s shattered, hopeless eyes. He knows, of course he knows, Great Spirits, I’m so sorry…

“Your Highness, General Xian is… General Xian is dead. What you see before you is all that is left of what we sent over the mountains.”

Nikon spoke loudly so that everyone could hear. The words cracked like thunder. Unable to restrain them any longer, Iroh shed salty tears, but made no sound. He remained at attention as he took the report.

“General Xian died in honorable combat against the enemy on the shores of Lake Myojin.”

He stood now and offered his friend the baton of command.

“I was with him when he passed, your Highness…” at this Nikon began to cry as well, but forced himself to continue.

“His last thought was of you… and the Fire Nation. On my life he asked me to deliver this to your hand.”

Iroh stepped forward, his back straight, tears flowing freely down his face, and took the baton.

“General Iroh, you are now in command of the Army of the Great Divide,” Nikon nearly shouted, his voice finally cracking, “By the Spirit of the Sun I pledge my life and loyalty to you!”
Chieng stood up and saluted, “Hail, General Iroh!”

“Hail, General Iroh!” the officers repeated as one voice.

Iroh stepped forward and hugged his best friend, the baton in one hand, his cousin’s letter in the other.

General Iroh sat slumped in his curule chair. He was alone in his tent. Two cups of hot tea rested on the circular table beside him. He could not bring himself to drink his, and the other would never be touched again.

In his hand he held his cousin’s final message. Finally, with a deep breath and wiping the tears once more from his cheeks, he lifted the cap off the tube and removed the scroll inside. He unrolled it carefully to reveal his cousin’s familiar, square lettered handwriting.

Dearest Cousin,

If you are reading this we have lost our gamble in the Southern Pass and a great part of the army has been defeated or perhaps even destroyed. I am dead or incapacitated and you are now locked in mortal combat for the very survival of the Fire Nation.

Hear me now and obey this final command! Whether Tien Shin lives or not, I appoint you Supreme Commander of the Army of the Great Divide.

Forgive me this. I alone know the awful burden I place upon you. I do this not because you are the brother I would have chosen, whom I have watched with love and pride grow from a young firebrand into a wise and resolute warrior, and above all, a good man, but because I believe that should I fall your leadership presents the best and only hope of victory for the Fire Nation.

This advice alone will I offer, if you would accept such counsel from a general disgraced by defeat. Remember the Battle of the Coral Sea and take to heart the lessons of our fathers! The first day of that famous conflict was a huge disaster from which no one expected to escape. How many others would have given up after that first, terrible day? Your father refused, as did mine. Their perseverance produced a victory that changed the course of the world. This is the challenge that lies before you now.

As for me, I have been plagued by my fears and by them I have been undone. Yes, I have known it. I have pressed on for many reasons, but none as potent as the certainty that the fastest way to end this war would be to lose it. Even in death I cannot help but do everything in my power to avoid that fate for the country I love beyond measure.

For this and only this reason could I do this to you, cousin, and I am sorry. You are the best and only choice.

Now, dear Iroh, grieve not for me, for you will carry the best of me inside you for all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own. Steel yourself now for battle, gather your friends close and lead your army to victory.

And now, at the last, I will beg you one final favor, cousin… If you live to see her again, please, tell her I loved her.

May we meet again in the spirit world.
The letter and its cylinder fell to the floor.

Yes, cousin, we will meet again. Farewell.
Iroh summoned his friends. It was now evening. They stood before him in a protective semi-circle. Nikon, Gan and Chieng. Xian's message lay on the table, once again enclosed in its protective case.

“Now,” the new general began evenly, “tell me everything.”

The tank commander drew a heavy breath and began the story of Nifong’s ingenious trap. Iroh’s eyes widened at the description of the wave and the allied army it carried. Chieng supplied the particulars surrounding the occupation of Cemetery Ridge and the Round Tops. Once again Nikon recounted the death of Xian, this time in detail. He concluded with a brief description of the retreat over the frigid peaks of the Ping Tou. Iroh’s friend neglected to relate his attempted suicide and Chieng gracefully allowed the omission.

Iroh considered the tale, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“What was my cousin doing out there? Did you ask the guards or the medics?”

Nikon and Chieng exchanged glances.

“We never found out,” Nikon replied, “We didn’t have time to ask before the situation went all the way to hell.”

“And what about Tien Shin?”

“We don’t know. We don’t know if the Comet made it out or not.”

“We don’t even know for sure if he was on the Comet,” the engineer added.

Iroh stroked his chin a moment in thought before continuing.

“Right, now let us consider our situation and options.”

He stood up and walked over to the large table behind him. On it was spread the campaign map of the western Earth Kingdom. His friends followed and spread themselves around the four sides of the rectangular chart.

“Gan, count it off,” Iroh commanded.

The Qu’ai Tau grimaced and produced a small book from his tunic. In a clinical tone he reviewed the losses in men and material at Lake Myojin. He read from the Order of Battle, listing each formation, its strength in men and equipment upon its dispatch over the mountains and its fate at the encounter.

“A complete disaster, General,” Gan summarized unnecessarily, flipping the book closed with a snap, “Over ninety percent of all forces committed destroyed, though the tank trains did a little better
proportionally. Three hundred and twenty seven million gold pieces in equipment lost – and that
doesn’t even include payload on the tank trains… Twenty three thousand soldiers dead or missing.”

The silence was thunderous.

“Has there ever been such a loss?” Nikon finally asked in a small voice.

“Not in material, no,” Gan answered instantly, “This represents almost six months of total Fire
Nation industrial output,” he continued, shaking his head in horror, “I…I…I’ve never seen a price
tag this big on anything – ever!”

“Who cares about the money!” Nikon almost shouted in dismay, “Great Agni, I meant our people!”

“I care about the men,” Gan retorted, uncharacteristic anger flashing briefly across his narrow
features, “and I care about the money! Those are my instructions from the Fire Lord, Nikon, and I
will do it whether it offends your sensibilities or not.”

“Oh bullshit, Gan, are you an accountant or a man!?” Nikon roared, his fists balling in anger, “If
you’d been there you wouldn’t give a damn about the money either!”

“I’m not impressed by your profanity, my friend,” the Qu’ai Tau replied, his normal calm restored,
“and I’m not ashamed to be called an accountant – that’s what I am. As for combat, I’ve had my
share, more than any accountant I know. I don’t remember seeing you at Nomura.”

Nikon opened his mouth to reply, but failed.

“He’s doing his job, Nikon,” Chieng reproved quietly, “Do you really doubt him?”

“No,” Nikon answered instantly, his anger fading as quickly as it had arisen, “No, of course not… I
just… I just don’t give a damn about the money when my people are at the bottom of that god damn
lake.”

Iroh eyed his friend sympathetically, but reproached him just the same.

“An army is not only made of men, Nikon, but of all the things they need to make war. We must
never lose sight of either.”

Nikon forced his fists to uncurl, his body to relax.

“Yes, General.”

“Now,” Iroh continued in answer to Nikon’s original question, “If I remember correctly, the Battle of
the Song was much worse in terms of manpower loss, over forty thousand dead. Sun Valley was
about the same as this.”

The young general paused before turning his attention once more to Gan.

“What about survivors?”

The Qu’ai Tau sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair before he replied.

“Two dreadnoughts, twenty eight tanks, and two thousand six hundred and forty men. Half of them
wounded.”

Iroh nodded once in acknowledgment before making eye contact with Chieng.
“What about Corona and Phoenix, Chieng, can they fight?”

“Yes, General, they need repair and refueling, but I can have them battle worthy in short order.”

The Crown Prince rubbed his chin again thoughtfully.

“The supply chain – how many dreadnoughts are running between here and the gulf of Gela?”

“Four, Highness,” Chieng replied automatically.

“Which ones?”

The engineer recited the names.

“And which types are they?” Azulon’s son queried, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

Chieng, until this point her expression an impassive mask, smiled wickedly, her golden eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Two carriers and… two of them.”


No one answered. The young general looked over to Gan.

“Forgive me, Iroh, but so what?” the accountant finally countered, his tone incredulous, “You’re not actually considering continuing the campaign are you?”

“I am.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Nikon gushed in horror, “I don’t care what’s in those trains. We have almost no armor or cavalry! We’ve taken tens of thousands of casualties! Nifong is probably on his way right now. We should be getting the hell out of here!”

“Not true,” said Iroh raising a finger in unconscious imitation of his cousin’s expression, “or at least not entirely true.”

“What do you mean? Which part isn’t true?”

“Come with me,” the Crown Prince instructed.

They followed him out the back entrance of the tent. They snaked their way through the camp to one of the main logistic staging areas.

Nikon whistled. Chieng beamed.

“Still not enough,” huffed the accountant.

Parked in front of them were eight rows of twelve tanks each. Obviously brand new, their steel sparkled in the sun.

“Replacements,” Iroh explained, “they arrived two days ago.”

Nikon ran his hand appreciatively along the body of the nearest machine.

“Yes, I’m sure Nifong will wet his pants when he hears we have these,” Gan remarked sourly, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture at the tanks, “So, including what we’ve got here, all told we
have about a hundred and thirty working units. We started with well over a thousand. We took eleven tank trains into battle and two survived, for a total of six remaining. No matter how you cut it we are at a severe deficit compared to our starting point.”

“We probably have another fifty tanks in the garrisons at Cam’ron and Nanjing,” Iroh countered.

“He’s right, Iroh,” Nikon agreed, his enthusiasm at the appearance of the reinforcements rapidly ebbing, “No matter how you cut it, not only are the mobile forces a fraction of what we started with, but also based on what we saw at Lake Myojin we’re probably outnumbered… I don’t know… 4 to 3, maybe worse. What do you think, Chieng?”

The engineer considered briefly before answering.

“Yeh, that’s about right. We’re facing pretty crappy odds now, General.”

“That’s even before accounting for the enemy relief armies that have arrived from the lake country,” Gan added.

“Very well, my friends, let’s return to the map.”

They abandoned the neat rows of armor and made their way back to the command tent. Once they were assembled again around the table Iroh continued.

“Nikon, you said earlier that Nifong is probably on his way right now, yes?”

Color rose briefly to his friend’s face at this reminder.

“Yes, well, sorry for the outburst, I just assumed he’d attack you immediately given his success against us.”

“Not an unreasonable thought, but if so, where is he?”

The question hung in the air.

“Yes, General, I see,” Chieng said finally, realization dawning in her expression, “he’d have been here days ago if he came straight through.”

“Right,” the new general agreed with a gentle smile, “but there’s been no sign of him.”

“Maybe he’s coordinating with the armies from up north? A pincer attack?” Gan mused.

“Word is that the relief armies have laid siege to Edo and Shimonoseki,” Iroh countered, indicating several scrolls lying next to him on the map, “Our garrisons are trapped there. If they were going to link up with the Army of the Granite Mountains they’d have bypassed.”

“Still, it’s not good, our rear is threatened,” Nikon observed, “and the supply chain to Gela is in real trouble. How are we going to continue the campaign, Iroh, if we get cut off?”

“Good question,” the Crown Prince replied, eyeing the map, “to answer that, we have to ask ourselves what our enemy’s intention is after his victory at Lake Myojin.”

Silence again greeted this question.

“Chieng?” Iroh prompted.

She hesitated, her face downcast.
“General, my… my judgment has been proven suspect in these matters, so I’d rather not speculate.”

“Nonsense,” Iroh replied with a trace of sternness, “stand up and be counted.”

She lifted her gaze to meet her commanding general’s eyes.

“All right…” she replied, uncharacteristic indecision showing in her voice, “Since he declined to attack immediately… I believe he is after something else, but I haven’t any clue what that alternate objective might be.”

“Relieve Amiganza?” Nikon offered, then with bitterness, “I mean we know now that letter was totally bogus.”

“Not likely,” Gan responded, “If cleaning us up isn’t worth the time then relieving Amiganza would be a complete waste.”

“Okay, then what?” Chieng prompted.

“Oh,” Nikon began, suddenly grimacing, his eyes transfixed on a different area of the map.

“Iroh regarded his friend evenly.

“Oh, sweet Agni,” he continued, “You don’t think he’d risk an attack on Mequon, do you?”

They considered this, tension filling the tent. Mequon, the last major Fire Nation colony in the Earth Kingdom, lay over three hundred leagues to the southeast, across the devastated wasteland known as the Dune Sea.

“It’s a really long haul,” Nikon said, answering his own question, and tracing a finger along the lower portion of the map, “almost six hundred leagues, because they have to round the Ping Tou down south, swing out east and then south again around the desert’s eastern escarpment… but we don’t have much in the way to stop him, do we?”

“We appropriated all of the colony’s mobile forces for the Nasu Campaign,” Gan agreed quietly, “If the garrison has to face the entire might of the Army of the Granite Mountains with no support… it will probably end badly.”

“If Nifong brings up proper siege equipment, even the primitive pieces of crap that passes for artillery here, it’ll just be a matter of time before the city falls,” Chieng agreed, “It doesn’t help now, but it was probably a stupid idea to strip Mequon entirely.”

“Leaving Mequon exposed was always one of the risks of the plan,” Nikon admitted, biting his lip, “How large is the garrison? Do we know?”

“About five thousand, but I’m not entirely certain,” Gan replied.

“Who is the governor?” Nikon continued, “A friend, I hope?”

Iroh and Gan shared a quick glance.

“Rhiannon?” the accountant prompted somewhat mysteriously.

Iroh nodded once, then looked down again at the map, a brooding expression on his face.

“Her,” Iroh corrected.

“Her?” Chieng questioned sharply.

“Is she hot?” Nikon injected before he could help himself.

Chieng and Gan shook their heads in identical displays of disgust.

“Yes,” the young general confirmed, kicking his friend sharply underneath the table, “but you would know her only as Governor T’zan. Rhiannon is her given name.”

Grimacing from the well-deserved blow, Nikon continued hesitantly.

“Um… wait a minute, isn’t Governor T’zan a man… like a really rich old man…?”

“Her father,” Gan supplied with a shake of his head, “and when he died a few years ago she was appointed his successor by the Fire Lord.”

“I never heard of this,” Chieng accused, as if Iroh and Gan were to blame for the oversight.

“He didn’t just die, Gan, he was assassinated,” the Crown Prince clarified, “and Rhiannon had been his deputy for two years before that. She is capable and popular, the appointment was natural. The Ministry of War suppressed the news of the assassination of course.”

“It’s part of our function,” Gan observed coolly.

“Assassinated by whom?” Chieng asked.

“Dai Li agents, apparently posing as civil construction workers,” the accountant answered, “Rhiannon had them arrested and executed, but the circumstances were rather mysterious.”

“How do you…?” the engineer began, but was cut off by Iroh’s curt reply.

“We grew up together.”

Chieng observed Iroh closely. She then looked over to Gan who looked troubled. After a few moments of silence Iroh returned to the original subject.

“How long do you think it will take Nifong to invest the city if we are correct?”

Nikon considered this, deciding to leave the subject of the governor of Mequon for later.

“Two months, maybe, if they have reserve mounts and good supply along the way, which they probably do. More important, I think, will be if the weather holds,” Nikon turned to the Qu’ai Tau to ask, “Aren’t we about to enter the wet season for the lower latitudes?”

“Yes,” Gan replied, “My father has told me the weather often turns sharply in the next few months.”

Nikon thought about this a moment. Then, expelling a large breath, concluded dully, “Well, whether he gets there fast or slow, what does it matter? It won’t change the outcome. Chieng’s right, the city is doomed if he decides to attack.”

“We can’t let that happen,” the engineer interjected vehemently, “If Mequon falls our ability to operate large field armies in the western Earth Kingdom will be eliminated. What will happen to the Army of the Song or the Army of the Cree Valley without Mequon to supply them? Supply by sea is acceptable for a single campaign, but not for years at a time. And once that ability is gone, how long
will it be until we are driven completely into the sea?”

“Or worse,” Gan added darkly.

“Yes,” Iroh agreed, “It is these very questions that concerned my father when he gave my cousin this task.”

Briefly the young general recalled the Harvest Moon Feast from what seemed another lifetime.

“Yes, I see no other real possibility,” Iroh concluded, “He will attack Mequon. If he succeeds, the war is essentially over and we are finished. Does everyone see that?”

He met each of their eyes in turn. He saw grim realization in Chieng’s, worry in Nikon’s, and cool acceptance in Gan’s.

“Our options are to retreat,” Iroh began, tracing each option on the map as he spoke, “fight our way back to the gulf of Gela and return to the Fire Nation in disgrace. Or, we can attempt to break the sieges of Edo and Shiminoseki in the hopes of smashing the relief armies threatening our rear, but leaving Nifong with the strategic initiative.”

Chieng snorted and looked away, clearly disgusted with both of those options. Nikon and Gan looked downcast.

“We will do neither,” General Iroh stated flatly.

All eyes turned once again to him.

“What will we do then?” Nikon asked.

Iroh straightened before replying, clasping his hands behind his back.

“We will cross the Dune Sea and destroy the Army of the Granite Mountains on the steppes east of Mequon.”

Nikon and Gan surveyed their leader in horror. Chieng’s eyes widened, her head nodding in approval.

“A bold plan, General,” the raven haired engineer offered, clearly impressed.

“Have you lost your mind?” Gan finally choked out, “There’s no water – I mean zero! Even if every tank train carries nothing but water we’d never make it!”

“Yes, my friend,” Iroh replied in a hard voice, “I probably have lost my mind, but that will not change my decision.”

“And I’d have thought you’d have had enough of bold plans after Myojin!” Gan declared, turning to Chieng with an incredulous expression.

"Fortune favors the bold, Gan,” she replied, quoting the ancient saying, "besides, we're in a shitty position, so pretty much any course we take besides laying down to die will require bold action.”

“One thing I am sure of,” the engineer continued, “is that there is no way in hell the enemy will expect us to try to cross the desert.”

“I agree with you there,” Nikon inserted, “but Gan’s right. We can’t carry enough water to get across and there isn’t any to be found in that blasted waste. It’s suicide.”
“There is water in the Dune Sea,” Iroh disagreed, “Plenty, as a matter of fact.”

“You mean the salt lakes?”

“Yes.”

“What good are they? We can’t drink salt water.”

“No, we can’t.”

“So… I don’t get it.”

Iroh turned to Chieng. Her eyes were suddenly apprehensive.

“We need a fast way to separate salt from water.”

Nikon and Gan shifted their gaze to the now visibly uncomfortable woman. A few moments passed in silence as each of them surveyed their chief technician.

“How do you like the plan now?” Nikon asked her quietly, his voice betraying sympathy the barbed question did not intend.

She allowed her fellow Myojin veteran a rueful expression before answering Iroh’s implicit challenge.

“There isn’t any.”

Iroh nodded.

“I understand, my dear,” the Crown Prince acknowledged gently, unconsciously using a term of endearment for the harsh engineer, “It will take a week at least to recall the dreadnoughts and gather the Nasu garrisons that aren’t yet under attack. You have that much time to come up with a solution.”

Indecision, anger, and other emotions warred within her. She lowered her gaze, her fists clenching.

“That’s not really fair, Iroh,” Gan injected, taking pity on the engineer, “You can’t just command miracles, or dictate invention. It just doesn’t work that way.”

“I believe in her,” Iroh replied softly.

Chieng’s head snapped up, confusion evident on her face.

“Why?” she asked, honest curiosity burning in her expression.

“You have a way of inspiring confidence in those around you,” Iroh responded with a smile, “and you haven’t let me down yet.”

She didn’t answer, her face betraying her doubt.

“Iroh’s not alone there, Chieng,” Nikon found himself saying to his own surprise, “I do too. We’ve been through way too much for me to doubt.”

The engineer quailed internally at the impossibility of the task before her, but she could not deny that she was touched by the simple expressions of faith from her companions. When had they become comrades rather than professional acquaintances? Were they actually friends? She was not used to asking these questions. Recoiling at such intimacy, especially in a public forum, she ignored the
“I can’t promise anything, General,” she said finally, crossing her arms across her chest in a gesture of self-protection.

“Yes, I know, but you will do your best. I know you understand that if we fail, all those who passed at Lake Myojin will have died for nothing.”

She looked stricken. Feelings of guilt threatened to overwhelm her once again. She dropped her gaze in fear of finding accusation in her leader's eyes.

“I best get started. May I go now, General?”

“Of course, Commander,” Iroh agreed gently with a slight dip of his head.

She walked stiffly from the tent, the weight of the entire Fire Nation on her shoulders.
Iroh promotes Nikon to second in command.

“You two are bastards,” Gan accused crossly.

Nikon held up his hands in a protest of innocence.

“We were just being honest!”

“You’re manipulating her.”

“Yes,” Iroh agreed with a small, but sympathetic, laugh, “I am, but I prefer to look at it as simply providing encouragement. I spoke only the truth. She can solve this problem. I just hope she has enough time.”

“Besides, Gan,” Nikon inserted smoothly, “when did you get so protective of our foul mouthed Lady of the Dreadnoughts?”

“Oh please,” the accountant replied, rolling his eyes, “probably about the same time you started handing her compliments like candy. I’m surprised you haven’t tried to pick her up yet, nothing daunts you in that department. Plus you’ve had all this danger, combat, and narrow escapes with her – and that’s always sexy.”

Iroh coughed, slightly uncomfortable with the sudden turn the conversation had taken.

Laughing for the first time since he had returned, Nikon remarked drily, “Must have slipped my mind, my friend, we were too busy, you know, avoiding death. Besides,” he concluded with a wink, “I thought it best under the circumstances to make peace with the enemy rather than provoke her anymore.”

“Very wise,” the Qu’ai Tau mused, one eyebrow rising in his stock gesture of appraisal, “I don’t know, Iroh, could it be our friend here is finally growing up?”

“Fair to say I think we all have.”

Gan nodded once in agreement.

“Right, I’ll get the recall orders dispatched then, your Highness,” Gan ended, switching to a slightly more formal address as he implicitly asked for permission to withdraw.

“Yes, Gan, go, and review the coding yourself. Every messenger sent to the Arno is at risk for capture.”

“Will do.”

The accountant saluted and left the tent.

The two remaining friends regarded each other.
“Well, my friend,” Iroh finally offered with a wry expression, “you survived at least and here I was sure I would lose both of you.”

“Yes, but…I don’t know if I’m happy about it or not,” Nikon replied without a trace of humor.

“Let’s sit down.”

Iroh walked over to the chair he’d used to read Xian’s letter, waving Nikon into the one opposite him, the table in between. Nikon seated himself while Iroh poured them two drinks of a clear liquid from a silver beaker.

“We could use these, I think.”

Nikon took one of the glasses, examined the contents briefly, and then stared at the floor once again. He was exhausted, his countenance once again haunted after the animated strategic discussion had concluded.

The new general raised his glass.

“To Prince Xian and all those who passed with him, may their sacrifice be not in vain!”

Both drained their glasses in one shot. The liquid burned pleasantly down their throats. A few moments passed in silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

“Thank you for not killing yourself by the way,” Iroh remarked suddenly.

Nikon, startled, looked at Iroh with a shocked expression.

“How did you…?”

"I'd be a pretty poor friend if I didn't know you'd at least try," Iroh replied with a small, knowing laugh, "That is, if the enemy didn't kill you first."

“You did the right thing, my friend,” the new general continued, “suicide would not have done anyone any good, but I have to ask, why didn’t you go through with it? I know it’s not for lack of courage.”

Nikon coughed, clearly embarrassed.

“Well, Chieng stopped me,” he confessed.

“Really?” Iroh exclaimed in surprise, “How?”

“She… kind of kicked my ass,” then, clearly trying to explain away the fact, “but, hey, she totally caught me by surprise!”

Quickly he related the mortifying episode on Cemetery Ridge, to his credit not leaving out the new found feelings of respect and admiration for the harsh engineer.

“Wonderful!” Iroh commented at the conclusion of the story, clapping his hands once in approval, “Truly that is a wonderful story all around. Chieng once again proves herself… uh…most remarkable, and you as the resident damsel in distress are saved against your will, resulting in both of you surviving to return to me. All things considered, I’ll take it.”

“But,” Nikon continued with a sigh, “Tien Shin was right, and Chieng for that matter, about Cam’ron. I know killing myself won’t help, and I promise I won’t try again unless you command it,”
Iroh snorted in utter disdain at this idea, but Nikon continued, “but, no I’ll never forget or forgive myself for it. Why should I?”

“Everyone’s made mistakes in this campaign, Nikon. You, me, Xian, Chieng, even Tien Shin. Since he’s almost certainly dead I can’t help but think he was either catastrophically wrong with whatever game he was playing or maybe he just hugely miscalculated.”

“Yes,” Nikon replied, brightening slightly, “At this point I’d never wish death on anyone, Iroh, but I can’t say I mourn that guy’s loss.”

“Me neither,” Iroh agreed, “Anyway, we should never forget our mistakes, because our main responsibility is to learn from them and make sure we do not repeat them. I only ask that you consider whether continuing to punish yourself helps you to do your job or hurts.”

Nikon blew out a breath.

“Okay, I’ll deal with it.”

“I hope so, because you’re going to be very busy.”

Something in the way Iroh said this caused Nikon to refocus on his friend.

“What?” he finally said with a trace of suspicion.

Iroh stood, Nikon followed suit.

“Commander Orlando,” he began formally, “I appoint you daimyo of the Army of the Great Divide.”

Nikon started at his friend in horror.

“Iroh, I don’t think I can –”

“Yes, you can,” Iroh contradicted.

“What about your infantry commanders? Hirano, Jian and a bunch of the others have twenty years of experience or more and they’re good! I respect them!”

“Yes, they are,” Iroh agreed, “and I respect them as well, but I need you to do this, the Fire Nation needs you to do this.”

His friend did not reply.

“Do you accept this responsibility, Commander?”

“I do,” he finally agreed, remembering his interview with Xian long ago and deciding to cut to what he realized was the only possible conclusion.

Iroh smiled ruefully, “Not how we thought this would go, my friend? Is it?”

“No.”

After a few moments of silence as Nikon tried to digest this news, Iroh continued, his face once again grave.

“Time for both of us to get some sleep. Tomorrow we must send word by messenger hawk to
Mequon. I will code the messages myself and give them to you for transmission.”

“Okay, sleep sounds good to me…,” then, hesitantly, “but…Iroh, how come you never mentioned
that girl before… what’s her name again?”

“Rhiannon, and she isn’t “that girl”,” he corrected, his brows furrowing, “She’s Lord Governor of
Mequon. For god’s sake remember that if we actually survive long enough to meet her.”

Nikon smiled, accepting the admonishment with a dip of his head.

“Will she help us?” he asked, “You didn’t look very happy when you spoke about her earlier.”

“She'll help us… but…” Iroh replied, clearly uneasy, “but, we might not like the help we receive.”

“What do you mean?”

Iroh panned around the tent to make sure they were alone before he continued in a hushed voice.

“She can… she can see things.”

The new daimyo was confused. Iroh sat down once again and motioned for his friend to do the
same.

“She has a gift, or, a curse, maybe,” he explained, “Her mother was from Kyushu, a descendent of
the Ainu people.”

Nikon’s eyes went wide. Kyushu was one of the western most islands of the Fire Nation and the
Ainu were the original inhabitants of the archipelago before they were conquered long ago by people
from the mainland.

“What do you mean? Visions or something?”

“Yes,” Iroh replied with a heavy sigh, “and they are never pleasant.”

“You mean the visions are painful? Or does she see bad things?”

“I think they are painful because she sees bad things. At least I have never known her to have a
vision of anything good or joyful.”

Nikon thought for a moment before asking, “Can she see the future?”

The young general nodded gravely.

“She has, yes.”

“Like what?”

Iroh looked at the ground and folded his arms across his chest. He began to recite the examples he
knew from his own experience.

“She foresaw my mother’s death a few days before it happened. I was six or seven and Rhiannon
had just come to the palace to be educated with us. She fell down in a faint, but her eyes were wide
open. She didn’t even know it was my mother she was talking about when she described the vision,
that’s why we couldn’t prevent it… if we had known who she saw we might have saved her.”

“Then a few years later she prophesized our defeat at the Song long before it happened. She couldn’t
bear to tell Xian, but she told me she saw his father die, strangled first with a garrote and then
stabbed through the heart with a curved dagger. Later we found out that was exactly how it
happened.”

“Why wouldn’t she tell him?”

“She loved him, even then, and couldn’t bear to tell him his father was going to die.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Yes, I did, and he even believed me, but there was very little we could do. Xian was maybe fifteen,
Rhiannon was thirteen and Gan and I were ten. No one believed us. Xian wrote my uncle a letter,
but he was dead and the battle long since lost before it reached him.”

“Wow!” the daimyo exclaimed, undeniably excited, “Can she control the visions at all? Why doesn’t
the Fire Lord have her chained up somewhere, you know, pumped full of drugs and surrounded by
legions of scribes or something?”

‘Because he doesn’t know!’ Iroh retorted with a flash of anger, upset at even the suggestion of such
a thing, “and no, she can’t control them! If she could don’t you think she would stop them?”

Nikon dropped his gaze to the floor, suddenly ashamed.

“I’m sorry, of course you’re right.”

“And my father must never know!” Iroh swore, his anger subsiding, but his voice losing none of its
intensity, “and above all, if by some evil miracle Tien Shin has managed to survive, he must never
know! Do you understand?”

Nikon agreed instantly, struggling to digest the information and all its implications.

“She hates it – most of all because none of these visions has ever done anyone any good. What good
is a warning if you can’t change the outcome? Besides, she is a patriot, Nikon. If she thought she
could use her ability to help us win the war, but experience has taught her otherwise. Father and Tien
Shin would never understand that – they would just try to use her exactly as you said. I only hope the
spirits had mercy enough to spare her any foreknowledge of her father's murder.”

The Crown Prince sighed once more, the emotion draining from his face. Suddenly he looked old
and tired. He stood up once more and Nikon followed suit. Iroh put a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Let’s not worry anymore about that tonight. We have no idea whether we’ll even survive the desert
… I’m afraid our trials are only just beginning, my friend.”

Nikon sighed, “No doubt about that.”

Iroh dropped his hand and looked out the doorway of his tent through which the stars peeked
through.

“All right,” he began again after a moment of silence, “time for sleep.”

Iroh turned and saluted his friend, his countenance sober.

"Hail, daimyo Orlando. May you live long and win great glory for the Fire Nation."

“Hail, who?” the young commoner replied with a short laugh and an incredulous shake of his head.
Nikon returned the salute and left to assume his new duties, his mind drowned deep in the fantastic news of the day. Despite Iroh’s command, there would be no sleep for either of them that night.
Tien Shin returns to the Army of the Great Divide expecting to assume command... only to find Iroh waiting for him.

The days passed swiftly. The garrisons of the nearby cities appeared, soon followed by those from the outer rim of the receding occupation. Two of the four dreadnoughts that were ferrying supplies from Gela arrived, bearing their final loads of food, ammunition and replacement parts for the remains of the army. Corona and Phoenix had been quickly refitted, as Chieng had promised. They glittered in the sun, their dents beaten out and fresh paint reapplied to their bodies.

On the sixth day the scouts reported a new set of dust trails, this time from the northeast.

Iroh once again looked through a sighting glass to see a tank train rocketing towards the army, an escort of tanks accompanying her.

“Has to be Sozin’s Comet,” Nikon surmised, squinting through his own instrument, “They must have come through the Meiji Pass.”

“Right,” Iroh agreed glumly, “So that’s it for Highhold Pass too.”

“That brings us up to seven tank trains at least,” the new daimyo observed, replacing his instrument inside his tunic.

“If he’s with them, Iroh, there’s going to be a fight, you know that right?” Gan predicted from the General’s left.

“Yes, I know.”

“You mean Tien Shin?” Nikon asked unnecessarily.

Gan confirmed the assumption with a curt nod.

“He can fight me for the position as far as I’m concerned. We can certainly use the Comet and the rest, but we don’t need him.”

“Not with you, turkey,” Gan retorted, chucking Nikon on the shoulder, “With Iroh.”

“Iroh? Why?”

“Xian’s gone, Nikon, do you think he’s just going to step aside?”

“But Xian himself appointed Iroh,” Nikon reacted with anger, “and that’s not just my testimony and Chieng’s, we have it in writing from his own hand!”

“That will mean nothing to him,” Iroh said dully, clearly dreading the conflict he feared was coming, “If he lives, I know what my step-brother will say and do.”

Both men looked at the Crown Prince expectantly.
“He will say his position was given him by my father and that Xian’s appointment was illegal.”

Each considered this argument in silence. The Comet and her escort grew larger on the horizon. They would be at the camp within minutes.

“I’m not a lawyer,” Gan began after a short time, “But I don’t think the claim would be upheld in court. From what I understand the commanding general’s authority is absolute once he has arrived in the theatre given to him by the War College and assumed command. After that only a direct instruction from the Fire Lord can trump the general’s orders.”

“I don’t think that even matters,” Nikon retorted with some exasperation, “Practically speaking no one in this army is going to support Tien Shin over the Crown Prince. Most of them are Iroh’s own infantry, so no, no way is this going against us.”

“Yes,” Iroh agreed heavily, “but it is still a problem, and we must avoid dissension at this stage.”

“I take back what I said last night, Iroh,” Nikon said bitterly, “I hope he’s dead.”

“That would at least be some justice,” the Crown Prince agreed.

“What will you do?” Gan asked in his clinical tone.

“Confront him.”

The Sozin’s Comet pulled into the roadway in front of Iroh’s tent just as the Phoenix had done the week before.

Slowly the sliding hatch on the side of the engine rolled back to reveal the former daimyo of the Army of the Great Divide. He was dirty, haggard, and his breastplate was dented from a heavy impact.

No one was there to greet him.

Two sentries stood outside Iroh’s tent. Tien Shin stepped down into the dusty causeway. He walked over to the tent’s entryway. The sentries saluted as he approached.

“What is this?” Tien Shin asked, clearly annoyed, “Where is Prince Iroh? Why am I not received properly?”

Behind them the escort tanks pulled up and slowed to a stop. Commander Tojo, the only other tank commander besides Nikon to survive, quickly joined him.

“Prince Iroh awaits you inside, your Highness,” one of the sentries responded.

Tien Shin strode through the entrance to the tent, followed by Tojo, passing through the entry hallway and into the main chamber beyond.

Prince Iroh sat in the curule chair reserved for the commanding general. In his hand he held the red baton, symbol of the Army of the Great Divide. At his side stood Gan, the hated Nikon, Liu Shiung’s opinionated daughter, and dozens of infantry commanders.

Nikon muttered something that sounded distinctly like “oh, shit” as Tien Shin entered.

“What is the meaning of this, Prince Iroh?” the former daimyo demanded, anger seething on his
normally tightly controlled features, “Despite the symbols of office you appear to claim, you have no authority to succeed your cousin as General!”

No one responded.

Tien Shin made eye contact with Nikon and spat, “I will have you executed for this!” For he knew the baton could only have been transported by the young commoner.

Nikon did not reply, his face an impassive mask.

“General Xian left written instructions that I was to assume command in the event of his death, Tien Shin,” Iroh explained evenly, motioning to the scroll case clearly bearing his cousin’s seal on the table beside him, “and I have accepted this responsibility.”

“That means nothing,” Tien Shin retorted, speaking loudly in a clear challenge to Iroh’s claim, “the Fire Lord himself appointed me daimyo, does anyone dispute this fact?”

Silence was the only response. Whether it was the silence of acceptance or not, it was difficult to tell.

“No one disputes that, Tien Shin,” Iroh replied finally, “but the fact remains that I am now Supreme Commander of the Army of the Great Divide.”

“And why should the army accept the decision of the man who led us to total disaster?”

Iroh stiffened at this accusation.

“You should be executed just for that, you cretin!” Nikon nearly shouted, his impassive countenance breaking, “You are just as responsible for this as Xian or any of us! You pushed the attack on the Southern Pass and you are more responsible than anyone for forcing us into that goddam fog!”

Tien Shin moved with lightning speed to draw his war fans, but he was grabbed by Commander Tojo and one of the sentries from behind before he could close the distance between him and the new daimyo.

Nikon smiled smugly as Tien Shin was pulled to his knees.

“No, your Highness!” Tojo said into his ear, “This isn’t the time!”

Tien Shin stopped struggling and scanned the audience. Gan and Chieng regarded him coolly, Nikon with undisguised satisfaction, and Iroh with an inscrutable expression.

“This is an outrage!” the elder prince said finally, “If we survive I will prosecute you for treason, Iroh!”

“You are free to do so,” Iroh replied, his voice once again smooth and even, “but if we live it will be because we have proven victorious. I very much doubt my father will be sympathetic to your arguments if I have succeeded in carrying out his orders.”

“What? What are you talking about?” the former daimyo asked, confusion rapidly replacing his anger.

“That was my reaction,” Gan quipped sotto voce, folding his arms across his chest.

“What are you proposing to do?” the elder prince asked, his countenance suddenly anxious.

“I believe Nifong has abandoned the Nasu Plain in favor of attacking Mequon.”
“And what is your plan? Follow him? Make an attempt on the Southern Pass?” he asked with a sneer, obviously dismissive of the approach.

“No, we will cross the Dune Sea and attack Nifong before he reaches Mequon.”

Tien Shin stopped short.

“That’s insane,” he said quietly, then trying to struggle to his feet, in a louder voice once again, “That’s insane! Everyone will die! Listen to me, all of you –!”

He was thrust again to the ground.

“And how do you plan to carry enough water to get across the wasteland?” the elder prince continued after he had regained his breath, “It’s three hundred leagues across!”

“Leave that to me,” the engineer injected softly.

“This is treason, Chieng,” Tien Shin insisted, turning to the raven haired woman, “I can’t believe you support this madness! I expected better from you!”

“General Iroh is in command, your Highness,” she replied with certainty, “My priority is to carry out his orders. So should it be with you.”

“Whether I do or not, do you really think the rest of the army will obey an order that amounts to suicide?” the elder prince questioned, “Have any of you even thought about how everyone else will react to this madness?”

“They will obey, Tien Shin,” Iroh responded, “because they are good soldiers, loyal to the Fire Lord, and because they realize, as I do, that we will lose this war if we don’t.”

“This is insanity and treason!” Tien Shin shouted, once again addressing the group, “The Fire Lord appointed me second in command and Xian has fallen! Prince Iroh knows he will be executed for treason if he returns, so he is willing to sacrifice your lives in a pursuit of an impossible victory –”

“Shut up, Tien Shin!” Gan thundered, his voice displaying an uncharacteristic pitch and power that surprised even Iroh, “You have made your dishonorable intentions plain! Do not compound this insult by debasing yourself further with these empty threats!”

Tien Shin paused. He scanned the room. This fight was futile, there was clearly no support.

Iroh stood.

“You will carry out my orders as well, Tien Shin,” the Crown Prince stated calmly, “Or I will have you executed. After all, wasn’t it you who said we have a common enemy to fight? I too suggest we focus our efforts where they belong.”

The logic was inescapable. Tien Shin glowered, knowing he was beaten.

“Very well… General.”
Iroh approached Corona, his boots crunching on the pebbles and broken ground of the camp. Dusk had fallen and the temperature dropped rapidly. Late summer had transitioned to autumn, and here at the edge of the desert the earth lost its heat quickly when the sun dipped below the horizon.

Corona stood ready to depart. The last of the supplies were being loaded into the rearmost cars of the train. Beside her the Phoenix was already powering up her drive engines.

Chieng stood at the last car, directing the loading of the final items. Her dark hair, usually pinned in a bun or plaited, hung straight down the back of her small frame. Iroh found he preferred it that way, but would never voice such an opinion. The Crown Prince allowed himself a few moments of observation before speaking to her.

Gather your friends close… he said. Iroh reflected on his cousin’s final advice as he watched her work. He knew her father’s name, of course, everyone in the Fire Nation did. He was the patriarch of the Schiung clan and the celebrated inventor of many of the technologies that had propelled their country to greatness. She was born to one of the most ancient of noble families, but did not act at all like one of those foolish idlers who ornamented the Great Houses. What was it like to grow up with such a father? Did she have brothers and sisters? He did not know.

“How goes the preparation, Chieng?”

She turned to him with a start. A vulnerable expression flashed across her features, but was quickly replaced with her professional mask.

“Almost ready, General.”

“I see,” Iroh replied, sweeping his gaze across the scene of activity before him, “Let’s talk.”

She regarded him briefly, then turned and led him to the Corona. Once inside they entered the small ready room attached to her quarters.

He scanned the chamber, hoping for clues about its owner. Her desk, neatly, perhaps even compulsively organized, lay against the wall nearest the hatch. Her chair, a complicated contraption on wheels and a simpler guest chair rested nearby.

A neat stack of engineering drawings lay on the desk. The top drawing was obviously a new tank design, the many pencil markings in red and blue testimonial to the rapid changes driven by the creator’s fertile mind. The handwriting was small, neat and very precise.

Built into the wall above the desk was a series of bookshelves and scroll carrels arranged in an attractive, geometrical design. He ran his eyes over the book spines, recognizing to his surprise a copy of the Lost Civilizations of the Ancient Earth Kingdom. Hadn’t she declared it worthless the first time they met? He was almost certain she had.
The other walls were sparsely populated. On the wall opposite the desk resided a utilitarian serving cart, crowned with a tea set and a teapot on an oil burner stand. To the right of the entrance hatch stood a beautifully carved and polished rosewood gaming table with a Pai Sho board inlaid in mother of pearl. Matching chairs waited patiently for a pair of players.

He sat down in the guest chair and motioned for the engineer to take her seat. She hesitated only a moment before complying.

Iroh could see her discomfort. Whether it was because of the journey and task ahead of her or because they were now alone he could not tell.

“You plan to leave tonight, then?”

“Yes, General.”

“Remember, a flare every six hours when you set up camp, right?”

“Yes, General.”

Her golden eyes bored into his, her expression guarded. Iroh could not recall her ever smiling with pleasure or happiness, and wondered how different she might look if she did.

“In private my friends call me Iroh,” he invited warmly; “I would be honored if you would as well.”

She lowered her gaze, uncertain how to respond.

“All right…what do you want from me, Iroh?” she asked finally, her question typically brusque.

She almost tripped over his name, and found to her surprise and continued discomfort that she liked saying it. Her face colored slightly.

“Well,” he said hopefully, motioning to the cart on the other side of the room, “I thought maybe we could have some tea?”

She shifted uneasily in her seat.

“Tea?” she repeated, as if she had never heard the word before.

“Yes, tea,” Iroh confirmed, “Unless… you don’t like it?”

“Uh, no, I do, I just… yes, okay,” she responded lamely. She made to get up from her seat, but Iroh motioned her back down as he got up himself.

The young general wheeled the cart over, the tea set and pot jangling as it rolled. Both were secured to the top of the cart with screws and metal fasteners, probably to prevent them from falling onto the floor when the train was in motion.

“I must say I like this,” he remarked in open admiration of the little trolley, “I don’t even have one these,” then with a smile and a wink, “I guess I don’t rate one yet.”

He opened the cabinet underneath to reveal a large collection of teas contained in various packets and canisters. Most were labeled. He saw “Golden Assam”, “Pu-Erh”, and “Lychee Green”. One very ornate label read “Imperial Silver Needles.” He had never heard of most of them before. They had names written in beautiful, precise calligraphy, undoubtedly from the same hand that graced the engineering drawings.
“Well this is impressive,” Iroh acknowledged, “I see you do like tea!”

“Yes, I do,” she admitted, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“Which is your favorite?”

“Um, I have many, but my favorite is probably the ginseng tea from back home.”

He saw no label that read ginseng. He picked up the largest without a label, a glass jar, its contents largely depleted, with a red ribbon around it.

“This one?”

Chieng nodded in affirmation. Iroh stood, opened the jar and began preparing the tea.

“I don’t get it, I thought Xian was the tea lover,” Chieng blurted out suddenly, “I’d always heard you had no time for tea, festivals or those ghastly court ceremonies.”

Iroh laughed, inwardly pleased that she had heard anything said about him at all, much less paid attention to it.

“Well, I don’t know where you heard I don’t like festivals, but I certainly agree that court ceremonies are ghastly, and yes, my cousin was the great tea lover.”

Iroh poured the water into the pot with a thoughtful expression.

“I resisted his efforts to convert me, I promise you, but as you know he was both persistent and persuasive,” Iroh continued, surprised and thankful to find himself relaxing comfortably into a memory of his cousin for the first time since he received news of his death, “Usually when I was angry or about to do something stupid he would suggest some nice, calming tea as a way to get me to think about what I was doing,” then with more than a trace of chagrin, “Of course, I’d almost always tell him just what he could do with his tea… and then I would go ahead and do something stupid.”

Chieng folded her arms and looked down, successfully hiding her reaction to this admission.

“But… I have to admit some tea sounds good right about now.”

The preparations complete, Iroh smiled at the engineer as he touched the oil burner under the teapot.

“No need for one of these when you have a firebender around.”

She looked first at him then at the teapot.

“I haven’t done this before,” he admitted with a sheepish grin, “so I hope I don’t embarrass myself.”

Placing both hands around the teapot, Iroh drew a slow breath and carefully heated the water to a boil. The kettle began first to steam, then to boil rapidly. The lid rattled as steam and spits of water started to escape.

“Oh, too much! Hold on.”

Controlling his breath tightly he regulated the temperature lower, a trick not many firebenders could master. The lid settled. She stared at the teapot, her attention rapt.

“Sorry, that almost got away from me, but I guess that should do it,” Iroh observed, hope hesitant in his voice, “Your family is from An’wi prefecture, yes? Did you grow this leaf?”
“Uh…no,” she said in reply to his second question, her reverie broken; “My mother did though
when I was growing up.”

“I don’t know much about tea, or Pai Sho for that matter,” he said with a gesture to the gaming table.

“Really? I’m surprised, your Highness. I thought Pai Sho was mandatory at the Academy.”

He frowned slightly at her recidivism.

“I mean, Iroh,” she corrected.

“You’re right, of course,” he admitted, “but I never had the patience for it.”

“You should make time for it – every strategist should,” she admonished.

“Would you play with me then?” Iroh asked, unable to suppress the hope in his voice.

“If we survive, yes,” she agreed.

They lapsed into an awkward silence. He wanted to continue the conversation, but was uncertain
how.

After a few moments he decided the tea had steeped enough. He poured two cups and brought them
over. He handed one to her and sat down again in the empty chair. She thanked him and each took a
sip. Iroh noted the quality and took another.

Chieng eyed her commander, obviously wondering where the conversation was going. After a few
moments she cast her gaze to the floor.

Iroh exhaled in something short of a sigh and placed his teacup on the desk.

“Please,” he began once more, his expression serious, “just tell me what you’re feeling.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes suddenly wide.

“I don’t want to feel,” she replied, more sharply than intended, “If I let myself feel I will go mad.”

She shivered against her will.

“Why?” Iroh asked in surprise.

“How can you ask me that?” she cried. She leaned forward in her seat, her body tense, “Didn’t you
hear what we told you? About the belly armor?”

“I did.”

She put her own teacup on the desk and continued her self-prosecution.

“Then maybe you didn’t hear that I supported Tien Shin’s decision to push the column into the fog? I
demanded it, told everyone they were jackasses for even debating it. Nikon neglected to mention
that.”

“Yes, he did, just as you neglected to tell me Nikon tried to kill himself, and would have succeeded if
it weren’t for you.”

She slouched slightly in her seat, “We both have things to atone for, I guess.”
Iroh shook his head.

“You are both startlingly alike in some ways, but I am glad to see you have become friends.”

“Really?” she challenged, skepticism etched on her face, “I know what people say about me behind my back… and I know it’s mostly true. Why would Nikon or Gan suddenly decide to like me? Or you for that matter? I’m a hard ass, I swear like a sailor, and when people are acting like idiots I tell them. I guess that makes me a bitch. I used to think that was an acceptable tradeoff for my achievements. Now…” her voice, which had been animated with contempt trailed off to nothing.

“Nikon says you are strongest person he knows. You saved his life by the strength of your spirit. He is your friend for life – you couldn’t get rid of him if you tried.”

“Oh goody,” she replied with only a trace of rancor, then in as much of an admission as she could make, conceded, “I can see he is loyal.”

“Gan appreciates intelligence as much as you do and secretly enjoys the arguments, though he never misses an opportunity to complain about them.”

A few moments of silence followed.

“And you?”

Iroh barely trusted himself to speak, but as he had initiated the conversation he felt obligated to proceed nonetheless.

“I see a person who sees the world clearly, but not herself. I see a person who has very little life to call her own because she has dedicated herself to others and to her country in the only way she knows how.”

He locked eyes with her as he spoke, his expression once again serious. She felt naked before him and lowered her gaze.

“Yes, you do have friends now,” Iroh continued with confidence, “and I can only hope you will find as I have that your friends and family are your greatest support and resource in life. Your reputation is hard, but you have earned the love and respect not only of your own people, but also of everyone in this army, including me. Have you forgotten Nomura? Have you forgotten Cam’ron? There isn’t a soldier left in this camp that doesn’t feel better with you nearby.”

She didn’t reply.

“Did Nikon tell you about what the sentries said to him on Cemetery Ridge about you?”

“No,” she said suddenly, but against her will, interested.

Iroh related the brief interlude where Corona’s sentries voiced the love and pride they held for their foul mouthed Commander.

Her eyes threatened to well at the story, but she controlled herself.

“How can they feel that way?” she asked, anguish breaking in her voice, “Any of them? How can you?”

“We have all made mistakes in this campaign, Chieng. Yes, the belly armor was a weakness they exploited, but do you really think the outcome would have been different if that had been corrected?
I doubt it. The enemy would have paid a much higher price to be sure, but the outcome would not have changed. And do you really think that Xian would have held up to wait for the fog if you hadn’t advocated moving ahead? I doubt that too with Tien Shin there.”

“Why are you insisting on forgiving me, Iroh?” she said in a stricken voice, “Even if you ignore all those things, I still helped plunge us into a trap! You were there for that yourself. I am as guilty as Tien Shin for Myojin. I killed my own people and I helped kill your cousin! How can you even stand the sight of me?”

She put her hand over her forehead, covering her eyes in shame.

“No, Chieng, no,” Iroh contradicted, his face contorted in anguish, “You are forgetting that I too agreed with you and Tien Shin. If you are guilty of this defeat or of Xian’s death then so equally am I! Because of this, like you, my mind has been clouded by anger, grief, and guilt, but I have done my best for the sake of the Fire Nation to put aside this pain to see the truth.”

“And what is this truth? The truth is that my cousin, whom you know I loved, made his own decision, and though your opinion and mine surely shaped the debate, it was Tien Shin’s implicit threat of prosecution that forced my cousin’s hand. Then, of course, there is the raw genius of our enemy. We would be fools not to acknowledge his quality.”

“In the end, there is plenty of blame to go around and you are no guiltier than the rest of us. You just feel that way because each of us is the center of our own universe, something I am only beginning myself to understand. I can see that you are particularly vulnerable to this because you hold yourself to an impossible standard of perfection I don’t think anyone can meet.”

“You ask how I can stand the sight of you. Because I would not have anyone else beside me in your position. Because the army needs you now more it ever has. Because the Fire Nation needs you. Because I need you – and I would not trade you, Nikon or Gan for anyone. After all, isn’t that what you told Nikon? Why should it be any different for you?”

“You must stop being so hard on yourself,” he concluded, concern evident in his voice, “Accept that mistakes and failure are inevitable, learn from them and move on.”

Chieng considered this before replying softly, her voice betraying more than a trace of emotional exhaustion.

“How can I not be hard on myself, Iroh, when you have placed the fate of the whole Fire Nation upon me? This time, if I fail, there will be no one left to move on.”

Iroh coughed, clearly caught off guard.

“Well, you’re the best,” he began lamely, “The best get the toughest problems...”

The false bravado quickly fell from his face, his countenance turning troubled.

“What?” she asked, observing the change.

“No, I won’t say that to you,” he vowed, clearly unsatisfied with his equivocation, “If in the end I have asked too much, that isn’t your fault. That’s on me. In the end I just see no alternative… and now… with the decisions all but made… all I can do now is worry,” he hesitated, now his turn to lower his gaze, “I’m sending you out there… to the very worst place on Earth, and if you die… if we fail, it’s my responsibility and no other.”

“I thought you believed in me,” she chided softly.
“I do,” Iroh’s head snapped up so she could see the faith in his eyes, “more than anyone, but… I still worry….” then with a trace of mock anger and playful jab of a finger, “I’m your superior officer - I’m allowed to worry about you!”

A few moments of silence passed as they regarded each other.

“Don’t you dare die on me, okay?” he said finally, consciously repeating his plea to her at Nomura, but with a different object.

She paused before replying.

“Iroh, if I am dead when you find me in that desert, you won’t have long to live either.”

He nodded in response. He knew she was right.

“I suppose I should thank you for telling me these things,” she said, looking down at her hands now folded neatly in her lap, “… and for saying goodbye.”

Iroh stood up. Chieng quickly followed suit, believing the interview at an end and worried that perhaps she had gone too far. Instead, before she could move, he took her hand in his. Stunned, she did not resist.

“No, this is not goodbye,” he said firmly, “and you have no need to thank me. I have told you only the truth and you needed to hear it. Not because it made you feel better, I can see that it did not, but because you needed to know that you are not alone. If we survive this, you will never be alone again. Someday, when you truly feel better, then you can thank me.”

“How?” she managed after a moment of shocked silence.

“Smile for me.”

He touched her cheek with the barest tips of his fingers.

“Thank you for the tea. It was excellent.”

He turned and left without another word.
The Happy Few

Chapter Summary

Iroh convinces the Army of the Great Divide to cross the Dune Sea.

“Hey, wait a minute!” boomed a familiar voice across the banquet hall.

Gao, startled by the interruption, turned to face the irate merchant of Shanxi.

“What is this!?” the fat merchant reproached, pointing an accusatory finger at the storyteller, “I thought you said there’s no sex in this story!”

“I did, Lord,” the old man replied, once again flummoxed by the fat man’s interlocutions, “and I swear I have not lied.”

Trimazu squinted at the storyteller, a shrewd and suspicious expression on his face.

“I think you’re full of crap!”

Zuko, arms crossed, ignored the offensive peasant and instead regarded his uncle closely. Iroh’s eyes were pinched closed, a look of discomfort on his face, as if he were expecting a blow. Each comment from their host caused his guardian to flinch ever so slightly.

“Oh, please!” Trimazu retorted, “Iroh’s obviously in love with that smokin’ hot Chieng woman and after that little exchange there’s no way they don’t end up together! You’re just never going to own up to it though are you, you wretched old bastard!? You’re absolutely determined that we get no sex at all, aren’t you!?”

The banished prince failed to stifle a small smile at his guardian’s obvious distress. His amusement was short lived. Zuko barely stifled a cry of pain as he felt Iroh’s iron grip on his wrist under the table. Trimazu immediately zeroed in on the source of the outcry, his face lighting up like a child receiving a gift.

“Ah, what, you don’t agree, Li?” the merchant wheedled, leaning over Iroh and leering at the scarred young man.

“Uh…” Zuko waffled, clearly unprepared to provide a response.

Iroh opened one eye to study his nephew, in turn allowing himself a hint of a grin at his nephew’s predicament, but refused to let go of his wrist.

“Well out with it, young man!” the merchant cried affably, “We don’t have all night,” then adding in his conspiratorial tone, “Or rather we do, it’ll be sunrise before we’re done at this rate, but we shouldn’t waste it now, should we? Mmm?”

Receiving no reply the fat man felt free to plow ahead.

“So which is it, Li, don’t you think old Iroh’s in love with the girl, or don’t you think she sounds totally hot?”
“Oh dear gods,” Chen Ho injected in a tone of exasperation and defeat, “Can’t you just let the performance continue without these incessant interruptions? Despite what you may think, Trimazu, your guests are not here for your crass antics or your silly and pointless cross examinations.”

Zuko thanked Agni for the surly neighbor’s comment as he desperately tried to think of a response.

“Oh nonsense, my friend,” the master of the house replied in his matter of fact voice, “My sparkling personality is always the highlight of everyone’s evening! Now,” he said turning back to the banished prince in full prosecutorial mode, “Let’s have it, Li!”

Chen snorted, but looked over at Zuko with heavily lidded eyes. Governor Tao, drink in hand, also looked over. Clearly he had to respond.

“Uh… no, I don’t think she sounds… hot, in fact she sounds a lot like my bitch sis –,” a quick yank on his wrist encouraged him to correct himself quickly, his voice rising half an octave, “I mean she sounds a lot like that bitch, Princess Azula!”

Zuko’s eyes darted over to his uncle, who frowned at his nephew severely, whether at the narrowly aborted error or the negative assessment of the engineer he couldn’t tell.

“Haha, maybe so, Li!” boomed the fat man as he cast a sidelong glance at Iroh before addressing Zuko once more, “Though by Gao’s account I daresay this Chieng woman doesn’t have a treacherous bone in her body, and to boot she seems to have a softer side that Ozai’s daughter was born without!”

Stifling the urge to agree and shooting his uncle an accusatory look, Zuko replied, “Well, I guess I wouldn’t know. I never heard of this woman - or most of the people in this story - before tonight.”

Without thinking Iroh drew brew breath to reply, but Trimazu quickly followed Zuko’s glare and turned his attention to the retired general.

“Well how about you, Xian, what do you think of our sexy engineer?” the merchant asked, his eyes bulging with barely suppressed glee, “Should we ask Gao here to insert a few pornographic scenes for our … aural pleasure, mmm?”

Iroh looked ill, his face coloring noticeably, “Uh… shouldn’t we return to General Nifong soon, Lord?”

“Good heavens, Xian!” the merchant exclaimed with a chuckle and a gesture with his drink that left some on his sumptuous vest, “You are a prude!”

“No, Lord,” Iroh contradicted smoothly, “but I believe our storyteller already said that we shouldn’t expect romance in this tale and I must admit that seems reasonable in a war story. Anyway, I think I’d like to know more about… our, uh, hero’s reaction to his great victory.”

“Yes!” Governor Tao injected fervently, “I agree with him, Trimazu, enough with the stupid fixation on this fascist whore!”

Iroh’s jaw clenched and his expression hardened at Tao’s remark, but he did not turn from his host. The merchant’s eyes widened slightly and his lips betrayed the ghost of a smirk. The aging general forced himself to smile.

Just then a servant tapped Trimazu on the shoulder and whispered, “A moment, your Enormity?”

“What, yes?” he replied absently, his eyes still locked on Iroh.
“The dessert is ready.”

“Oh thank heaven,” the master of the house cried with relief, finally turning from his guest of honor, “Do bring it in! I’m starving!”

“Yes, you look like you’re wasting away,” came the predictable barb from Zuko’s right.

“I am! I am!” the obese merchant agreed, patting his ponderous belly for emphasis, “As you said, dear neighbor, I don’t get this figure eating tofu! Oh, but I must say the pork I ate earlier is giving me terrible wind!”

At this he made a face, leaned over and strained, but nothing happened. A ripple of shocked horror echoed up and down the nearest tables of guests. This was apparently beyond the pale, even for Trimazu. Iroh and Zuko, transfixed with horror, found themselves completely unprepared for their host to make good on his threat from the carriage ride.

Governor Tao rolled out of his seat to avoid the blast that never came.

“Great Spirits, man!” Tao roared, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

The fat merchant resumed his normal seating position, a disappointed look on his face, and replied, “I just told you, Tao, wind! It just won’t come out! Well, we’ll just see about that after dessert!”

“Trimazu,” began the Governor, desperately trying to control himself after this truly monstrous impropriety, “you make a big deal about farting in public, but I don’t see you doing very much except making a scene,” then, pointing an accusatory finger at the trader, “You know, I think you behave badly just so you can get a reaction!”

“You are joking, Lord Governor,” Chen Ho asked incredulously, “just how long has it taken for you to figure that out?”

“Ha! Tao, what now? Are you calling me a hypocrite, mmm?” cajoled the fat man with a twinkle in his eye and ignoring his neighbor once again, “I assure you, I’ve killed so many servants with my uncontrollable wind that my own kitchen refuses to serve me my favorite dish of chicken in mint sauce! I pray for your sake that you are not present at a banquet where they make available this fine, but extraordinarily effervescent delight!”

The silence in the room was deafening. Perhaps realizing he might actually have gone too far this time, the merchant pressed forward.

“Okay, yes, well, while we are served the best sweets in the four plains region, let’s take Xian’s sensible suggestion and return to our hero!”

“Soon, Lord, soon,” Gao promised, anxious to recover the audience’s attention after the merchant’s horrifying attempt to evacuate his bowels in public, “But first, we will see how the Fire Nation successfully bridged the mightiest desert on Earth…”

The orders had been issued, but the army refused to move. Panic had spread amongst the soldiers when it became known that they were to march across the Dune Sea, for no one had ever heard of such a feat.

Iroh held council with the general staff in his tent to decide what to do with the unwelcome news. The punishment for insubordination in the imperial army was usually severe. The punishment for
refusing an order from a member of the imperial family was death. The debate would likely be ugly, the outcome uglier.

“I told you this would happen,” Tien Shin reproved through gritted teeth, “General.”

“What exactly has happened?” Gan asked in his clinical tone, “Let’s get the facts out on the table.”

“The written orders were distributed at the beginning of the second watch,” Nikon supplied, “the brigade commanders, including Prince Tien Shin, gave no indication that the company commanders anticipated any issue with the orders. About half an hour later I received multiple reports that the soldiers were refusing to decamp. Maybe a half hour after that I received a written request signed by representatives from all but the second and seventh infantry divisions for a meeting with General Iroh and I to discuss the plan to enter the desert.”

Tien Shin barely waited until Nikon had finished before he once more took the offensive.

“I can’t believe this wasn’t anticipated. Did you really need anyone to tell you?” he rankled, ignoring the new daimyo’s barb, “especially after I warned everybody?” then turning to address Iroh directly, “This is your mess, brother, what do you intend to do about it now that we have open insurrection?”

“I will meet them and listen to their concerns.”

“The penalty for refusing to obey an order of the imperial family is death, Iroh!” Tien Shin replied in shock, “If you dare show weakness here how long will it be before men think nothing of disobeying our orders?”

“You said yourself this plan was madness, Tien Shin,” the Crown Prince retorted, “yet now you favor executing our own men for having the courage to say so?”

“No, I favor executing them for the crime they have just committed,” the elder Prince replied in his calculated voice, “and to avoid a dangerous precedent. If you fail to follow through on the punishment required by law you will have proven yourself as weak as your cousin. Further, if you brook this insubordination Iroh and live to return home, rest assured you will be prosecuted for this failure – whether I survive or not!”

“Executing our own men will solve nothing, Tien Shin,” Iroh countered, ignoring the insult and his own rush of anger, “and if you care about having men follow you, then you should take more care to give them something worthwhile to follow!”

“Be that as it may, General,” Commander Tojo injected, slowly shaking his head, “We explained the orders. They know the fate of the Fire Nation is at stake, but they believe we will either die in the desert, or die outnumbered and outfought on the steppes of Mequon.”

The young general paused to consider this.

“I understand, Commander,” Iroh finally replied, standing up and straightening his uniform, “Very well, I will address them now.”

Iroh and his comrades approached the center of the camp where thousands of Fire Nation soldiers stood in quiet expectation. A knot of junior and non-commissioned officers stood ready to receive the general staff.

“Hail, General Iroh!” they cried in unison as Iroh approached and saluted.
The leader of the Army of the Great Divide stopped in front of them.

“I am told the army refuses to move,” the Crown Prince began without preamble in his best theatre voice and a relaxed smile on his face, “over some concern regarding our supply of water and the strength of our enemy. Have I heard right?”

The men in front, one of whom to Nikon’s surprise was Jin, his former tank driver, shifted nervously and nodded.

“Very well, with whom am I dealing then?”

After some consternation, a middle aged man in the uniform of a non-commissioned officer finally spoke. His voice was rough and used the poor grammar and barely understandable accent of the outer islands, but his sentiments were carefully composed.

“There aren’t no leaders ’ere except yerself, Highness; ’tis is no rebellion. Y’er our general and we’re true to the Fire Lord, yer father, and ta the Fire Nation. We haven’t moved, m’ Lord, cause we don’t understand how we kin survive the desert nor how we kin overcome the enemy even if we do beat our way through. Every man of us’ll throw down our lives for our country and the Fire Lord, our great Father, but what good will it do to throw our lives away for naught?”

Iroh considered this for a moment before mounting a nearby supply crate. The crowd, which had buzzed with hundreds of individual conversations, fell silent to hear the words of the Fire Lord’s son.

“Well spoken, soldier!” Iroh began, his voice loud and strong to address the greater audience, “and I do not regret this opportunity to speak to my comrades face to face. The soldiers of the Fire Nation deserve no less from those whose privilege it is to lead them in honorable combat.”

Relief washed through the mass of soldiers at this pronouncement, for many had feared the wages of their recalcitrance would be the revival of the ancient punishment of decimation.

“I am told that we cannot cross the Dune Sea because we cannot carry enough water for the crossing, and that if we do, we shall be outnumbered and outfought by our enemy.”

A few men cried in agreement at this, but Iroh went on unperturbed.

“To these charges how can I respond, but with the truth? Judge for yourselves by my delivery and countenance whether what I say now is good and right.”

“The desert can be crossed and by the Spirit of the Sun we will cross it! The Dune Sea has as much water as Lake Laogai and more - trapped though it is in the salty pools of the innermost desert. Every one of you witnessed the departure of our mighty dreadnoughts and their mechanics nearly a week since. For what purpose did they leave in advance of the rest of our host? Why, to prepare for us the water we will need to cross the wasteland. We have only to meet them at the appointed place to replenish our precious resource.”

Here Iroh paused as the crowd digested this.

“But what of the odds, General?” an unseen soldier cried, “We hear we’re outnumbered two or three to one against!”

Then Jin the tank driver shouted, “Nifong destroyed us at Myojin with all of our weapons, your Highness! How can we hope to face him now?”

Iroh looked over at his staff, locking eyes with Tien Shin, whose face was an impassive mask, before
returning his attention to the crowd. One of the elder officers then stepped forward to address him directly, using the sonorous and lilted speech favored by the lesser nobility.

“General,” he said with conviction and sorrow, “would that we had but ten thousand of those who fell on the bloody shores of that accursed lake! Would that we had but a few of those dreadnoughts that met their end in the dark waters! Then we would follow you to the very ends of the Earth!”

The crowd buzzed with agreement at this sentiment, for it seemed fairly spoken.

“How many here wish it were so?” Iroh cried in response, his voice echoing over the crowd.

“Would ten thousand or a hundred thousand more mean victory if the Spirits have decreed otherwise? No! We had tens of thousands more at Lake Myoijn and yet the terrible fate of my cousin and those brave souls who perished with him that day could not be unwritten!”

“Yes, we are outnumbered! But I hold that numbers will not help if the Spirits have decided against us! And if they have decided in our favor, then we cannot lose! Were we not outnumbered at Han Tui? Were we not outnumbered at Gar Sai? Were we not outnumbered at the Coral Sea? Yes! Worse even than today! Yet victory was ours at those mightiest of battles!”

“But comrades, if we are fated for victory, then I would not wish for one more man to come with me into this blasted hell. For the fewer who ride with me to victory, the greater the honor of our triumph shall be!”

“No, I wish for no more. Let the honor and glory of our great enemy’s downfall belong only to us! The strong, the brave, and the faithful! I have commanded the army to move, but let it be known that I shall not force even one soldier to accompany me across the wasteland. Not one! Instead let all those who refuse this noble course be allowed to depart the camp without penalty, discharged from the service of the Fire Lord, and as common citizens may they make their way back home.”

“For I know, dear comrades, that in years to come, those who live through this trial will be called upon by their friends and families to account for where they were and what they did on the great battlefield of Mequon! Those few, those happy few, who join me today in pursuit of this great destiny, shall write their names large in the history of the Fire Nation and hold in their hands the fate of the entire world!”

"Come with me now, all of you, and let the Children of Agni go forth together as one to win the greatest victory the world has ever seen!"

General Iroh saluted the soldiery, and with a single cry they returned the gesture. He dismounted his makeshift rostrum and entered the desert on foot.

The Army of the Great Divide followed.
Chapter Summary

Prince Iroh's army crosses the Dune Sea at high cost.

The stars shone brightly overhead as the Fire Nation column struggled southwards. The Nasu Plain lay a hundred and twenty leagues behind. Before them the Dune Sea stretched endlessly from horizon to horizon. Mostly a sand desert, there were nevertheless many areas that were hard pan, where rocky outcroppings eloquently expressed the relentless erosion of wind and sand in stark sculptures of stone.

Corona, Phoenix and Sozin’s Comet had departed under Chieng’s command as planned nearly a week before the rest of the army had gathered its last stragglers. At first the army followed their trail, but as soon as the sand dunes appeared the track had soon been lost. They headed south and slightly east, taking star sightings regularly to keep them on the previously agreed upon course. When the areas of hard pan were encountered the army was able to speed up noticeably, and they were gratified to see unmistakable signs of Chieng’s passing in these places.

Iroh and Gan stood on the bridge of the Constellation, once again poring over the campaign map mounted on the operations table. The tank train motored slowly ahead, keeping rough pace with the infantry laboring alongside, their breath showing in the cold night air. Behind the infantry dust trails indicated the other leviathans and armor bringing up the rear.

“How much water do we have left, Gan?”

“Two days.”

Iroh did not reply. He already knew the answer, but he asked each day nevertheless. They had brought just enough fuel to reach Mequon, and filled every other sealed tank wagon with water. Even with severe rationing they could not hope to get through the desert unless Chieng succeeded.

“How far have we come tonight?”

“Six leagues, pretty good so far,” Gan replied, looking over at the Chief Boiler Operator’s station, “At this rate we should make one or two more before sunrise.”

Leaning over the map, Iroh used a straight edge to plot their likely position at the end of the day’s march.

“That would put us… about… here.”

“Yes.”

“That leaves about forty leagues before we reach the first of the salt lakes.”

“Yes, so we’re still in trouble,” the Qu’ai Tau confirmed.

“Three days without water at least,” Iroh asserted grimly, “assuming Chieng found the first lake suitable for her experiment and assuming the charts are roughly correct… and we know how well
that worked out at Myojin.”

“This doesn’t look so good either, Iroh,” Gan observed quietly.

“No,” the young general admitted, “It doesn’t, but we’re committed.”

“That we most certainly are.”

Iroh pushed the straight edge away and stood up. The crescent moon cast a ghostly light over the silent landscape. The forward view ports showed nothing but desiccated, wasted land stretching endlessly to the horizon. Seemingly devoid of life, the desert seemed like the surface of some alien world. The outside temperature gauge on the dashboard registered nothing.

“Below freezing again tonight,” Iroh observed.

“Nothing to retain heat out here,” Gan explained and not for the first time.

“How many tonight do you think?”

“Probably about the same.”

Men had died each of the last several nights on the march due to exposure. Each night Iroh marched with the infantry, unable to ride in the comfort of a dreadnought while common soldiers suffered. Nikon had threatened to chain him up in the belly of the Constellation to keep him from taking the risk, but Iroh ignored the threat. He had pointed out Nikon’s hypocrisy in the matter as his daimyo had quietly done the same.

They had anticipated the water shortage, but not the cold. Given the inevitable choice of moving during the day or at night, the clear consensus had been to march at night. The days were blistering hot and the men sheltered in holes dug hastily in the sand or hardpan to get as much sleep as they could. Even the tank crews did this since the metal machines became ovens after only a few hours in the sun.

At night, however, the temperature dropped precipitously, and exposed skin, cracked and sunburnt despite the precautions, quickly became numb. Every blanket in store had been distributed, but there were few coats, as the original plan had never envisioned winter or heavy mountain warfare. Those blessed by Agni with the gift of fire could for the most part, depending on their stamina and degree of mastery of their element, ward off the deadly cold. Those who were not so favored suffered.

“Anything further from Tien Shin?” Gan inquired after a few moments of observation.

“Not a peep.”

The former daimyo had accepted the loss of his former status without comment or visible reaction, and to his credit Nikon had not abused his new position though he was sorely tempted. The elder prince, for the moment in operational command of the armor, had ridden atop the point command tank and followed every order without complaint.

“He’s up to something, Iroh,” Gan speculated with intensity, “he’s planning something. You know he was probably behind the army’s refusal to move into the desert.”

“What can he do?” the young general replied, ignoring the accusation though he privately agreed with the conclusion, “I’m sure he intends to write a letter to Lady Ila as soon as we can get to Mequon, but that’s all he can really do.”
Gan laughed bitterly, “Really? He’s going to run to mommy?”

“Yes, I think so. She knows how to manipulate father through his fears as well as he does. Perhaps better, because of course she is the one who showed him how. If Tien Shin is ambitious, it is his mother who made him so. If I have an enemy, it is her.”

The Qu’ai Tau hesitated a moment, then asked, “What about your brother?”

"Ozai?” Iroh said with some surprise, "My brother is ambitious, but he is not my enemy," then, with a thoughtful expression, "Well, perhaps we shall see about that as well."

Gan, nonplussed by this response, continued with the prior train of thought.

“What will Tien Shin say to her, do you think?”

“The truth, I imagine,” came the dull reply, “and she will try to poison the Fire Lord against me, probably by saying that I intend to use my illegally seized army to overthrow him.”

“Oh, that’s just preposterous,” Gan scoffed.

“Of course,” Iroh agreed, “but Master Chen is most likely dead on much less evidence than there is against me. I did in fact seize control of the army against the second in command appointed by my father. In the land of the desperate and paranoid, I’m afraid that’s an open and shut case.”

The Qu’ai Tau considered this, his face darkening, for he knew Iroh had become a good judge of such dangers.

“Well, we don’t have any long range messenger hawks left, so he can’t send any messages unless we reach Mequon… and you and I both know Rhiannon won’t help him. She wouldn’t piss on him if he were on fire.”

“No,” Iroh agreed, “she won’t help him under any circumstance.”

A few moments of sullen silence passed before Gan asked the ominous question that hung between them.

“Do you think you’ll be arrested then if we survive?”

“That depends on the outcome here, my friend,” the young general equivocated, “as I said to Tien Shin, if we destroy Nifong and his army, then no, probably not. Even if my father suspects me, he wouldn’t support it. The people need a hero; there have been none for many years.”

“You’re becoming quite a politician,” the accountant observed with a wry expression.

“I have to, don’t I? If I expect to survive…” his voice trailed away.

“What?” Gan prompted.

“Just something Xian was trying to tell me before we left,” he answered, sadness etching itself once again on his face.

“We all miss him,” Gan observed gently.

“I know.”

Iroh abandoned the flight deck of the Constellation to resume his lonely march.
Four days passed. The Army of the Great Divide desperately searched the sky. If Chieng succeeded, she was supposed to launch a flare every six hours from her camp as a signal. They had seen nothing. It was almost daybreak and dawn’s rosy fingers already stained the eastern horizon. Iroh and his companions knew they would not live to see another.

The last of the water had been distributed the evening before last. Exhausted, suffering from exposure and lack of sleep, the army had suffered badly. Hundreds had died of cold, scorpion bites and buzzard wasp stings. Some had disobeyed orders and drank cactus juice. A few who tried the bitter liquid died almost instantly, but most had gone mad and ran into the desert to die despite all efforts to restrain them. Some veterans of Lake Myojin who drank the juice, tortured by their memories, had suffered flashbacks of the battle. Screaming in rage they had attacked their own comrades. These terrifying episodes had resulted in the summary execution of these miserable unfortunates.

The effects of dehydration on the weakened men had been swift. More had passed to the spirit world in the last day than had died during the whole march. Morale had broken down completely under the effects of deprivation, exposure and stress, but the army refused to give in. Each of them had made a free decision and they would see it through to the bitter end.

The young general had marched with the infantry since they had entered the desert. Nikon had started once they started to lose people due to the cold. Now that the water had run out, Gan joined them as well, declining to remain in a tank train while his companions died around him.

The soldiers had not cheered them when they appeared, for they knew now why they marched alongside them. Still, many saluted and cast expressions of gratitude for having commanders whose last act was to perish with their comrades. Around them the labored, harsh breathing of the men sounded like death rattles.

The desert went on forever. Heaps of sand that offered no sure footing spread in all directions. The wind was constant and seemed to come from all directions. During the day it was stifling hot and at night it was biting cold. At all times it carried dust and sand that irritated lungs and skin.

Iroh felt dizzy. The alien world before him spun in slight exaggeration of his own footsteps. He tried to combat the unnerving sensation by keeping his eyes focused on the sandy terrain underneath him. When he yielded to the temptation to scan the horizon, hoping against hope to see salvation in the form of an exploding flower in the sky, his perception rocked and leered dreadfully.

Gan coughed beside him, his lips already cracked and bleeding. Nikon fared no better. An enormous skeleton of some long extinct creature lay exposed, bleached a blinding white, on a nearby dune. None stopped to investigate, as many who had stopped for any reason found themselves unable to continue.

He thought of many things as the minutes and hours passed in warped, slow motion. Walking the gardens in the palace at midsummer… playing with Gan, Xian and Rhiannon as children… the first time he mastered lightning… the vision he had long ago of standing before the palace of the Earth King inside the mighty walls of Ba Sing Se… the nightmare at Nomura… but most of all he thought of her.

She must be dead, Iroh thought bitterly, but mercifully could shed no tears, I sent her away to die and now… now I have killed us all.

The march went on. They hadn’t spoken in hours, it hurt too much. Iroh’s head pounded with a
blistering headache and he felt dreadfully nauseous. He prayed he did not vomit – vomiting in this condition meant death.

The sun peeked over the horizon.

“Do you regret… regret coming with me?” Iroh finally croaked to his friends, not sure how much longer his feet would carry him.

Nikon put a hand on his shoulder, smiled and shook his head.

“Ask tomorrow,” Gan dared to reply with a grin, his voice an unrecognizable rasp.

Iroh would have laughed if he had been able. How could there be any tomorrow? They were finished.

Moments later the sky to the southeast flowered orange and then red, followed closely by a dull report.
The army answered with a flare of its own, but, maddened by thirst and driven by despair, soldiers of all ranks surged toward the distant red flash without instruction and without order. The heat had begun to mount as the morning sun rose steadily in the sky. Instead of digging shelters to hide from the harsh and unforgiving daylight, many exhausted themselves in a futile and dangerous sprint that ended in the collapse of many on the barren sand dunes.

Iroh and his friends trudged on, their faces blank and feverish with heat exhaustion, their movements stiff and jerky. Barely aware of their surroundings, they saw, but did not recognize the significance of, a dust trail that bloomed rapidly on the horizon.

Soon a tank train appeared, slowing to a stop in front of the struggling column, and was instantly surrounded by the dying soldiers. The large side hatch slid open to reveal Chieng and her technicians who tried in vain to dismount in the face of the massed human misery pressing upon them. Those who could speak without pain cried for water and help.

“Stand back! Give us room!” Chieng ordered, her sharp voice piercing the cries of anguish and need.

The engineer dropped to the ground, followed quickly by some of her bolder crewman, who immediately began to unload small pallets of water bottles. Others began to open the panels on the tank wagon cars to begin dispensing water from the bulk containers.

“Get the wounded and those who can’t walk into the engine!” she commanded, her eyes searching the desperate mass of people.

Within a few moments she found the face she sought. She pushed her way through the crowd to Iroh and her friends. He was gaunt, his once rich sideburns hanging loosely from his cheeks, and his lips had obviously been bleeding.

“See,” the Crown Prince croaked, grinning, despite his fever and nausea, “not good bye.”

The world went dim as heat and dehydration finally dragged the young general into oblivion.

Iroh woke in darkness save for a single lamp behind him and to his right. He lay on a bed, under a surprisingly soft cover. His lips were still cracked, but he had clearly been given water while he was unconscious. He patiently propped himself up in bed and took the glass. He winced as a he took a sip of the wonderful liquid. His lips still protested, but after acclimating to the sting he drained the glass completely.

He felt lightheaded, but not nauseous. Without any clear plan of action, Iroh removed the covers and
swung his legs out of bed. His uniform was gone and he wore only a simple maroon tunic.

He looked to his right and saw the light source, a lamp on a reading table with a comfortable seat next to it. A book lay open on the table, patiently awaiting its reader. On the other side of the room stood a dressing table made of rosewood with a large mirror held in place by a pair of beautifully carved flames. On the wall opposite the bed hung a framed blueprint of a Fire Nation battleship. Above the print two portraits were hung, but their subjects could not be seen in the shadows.

Iroh stood up swiftly and promptly lost his balance. Unprepared for the weakness in his legs, he tried to grab the bed post, but missed. He hit the floor with a clatter and a curse.

Moments later two Fire Nation medics appeared and gently helped the general to his feet. They led him over to the chair by the reading table and lowered him into it. After a few shouts the doctor was summoned. She promptly began examining his injuries.

“What is the situation, doctor?” Iroh demanded in a voice he intended to make stern, but came out instead distressingly weak, “I’m fine, I don’t need –“

“You’ll do as I instruct,” the middle aged woman ordered, cutting him off abruptly, “and I will be the judge of whether you are fine or not, General. Try to keep in mind that you’re no good to anyone dead.”

He stopped short. Hadn’t he said something like that to somebody recently? He couldn’t remember. He was confused. Maybe she was right.

She gave some curt instructions to the medics who departed the room immediately.

The doctor dragged the small chair over from the dressing table and sat down in front of him to continue her examination in earnest. She hummed a soothing tune as she worked. Iroh recognized it as a lullaby his own mother had sung to him when he was little.

“Your wounds are healing,” she finally said with some satisfaction, “Like many others, though, you need to rest for a few days and avoid the sunlight. No firebending either.”

“We can’t stay here,” Iroh said finally, his head buzzing.

“Drink this,” she replied, handing him a glass of bubbling water.

“What is it?”

“Mineral water, it will help keep your stomach settled. Now stop asking questions and drink, please.”

Iroh complied.

One of the medics entered and offered the doctor a leather bag. She accepted it and the young man promptly retreated the way he came. She began rummaging in the bag and quickly produced rolls of bandages, various jars and a few instruments.

Iroh observed her work as he drank and found comfort in her fussing, professional as it was. The doctor looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her. He squinted at her, his brow furrowing in thought, but she did not react.

“That’s better, thank you, Doctor,” Iroh admitted when done with the mineral water.

“See? Listen to me and all your problems will be solved,” she said with a smile.
“I wish that were so, I seem to be rather good at acquiring them recently,” he replied ruefully.

“Get used to it, General,” she said absently as she began to apply another coat of the clear ointment to his blisters, “you will find, if you haven’t already, that power attracts problems.”

“Wonderful,” he observed with some bitterness, “any other sage advice?”

“Get good at solving problems,” she answered seriously, shrugging her shoulders, “Or at least dodging them.”

“That was supposed to be a rhetorical question.”

She laughed wryly, “That’s the real answer though.”

“I’ll go with that,” Iroh replied, taking a liking to the physician, “and what is your name, doctor?”

“Kanjana.”

“Okay, Kanjana, where am I?”

“On board the Corona.”

“How did I get here?”

“You really don’t remember?” she asked, concern creeping into her voice, “You didn’t drink any cactus juice did you?”

“No! I’m not crazy, or at least that crazy.”

“Okay, what do you remember?”

“I remember… walking in the desert, then some awful dream about smothering… and then I’m here.”

“You were farther gone than we thought then,” she concluded grimly, “You and many others hadn’t had water in a couple days at least. We saw your flare and came on Corona with all the water we could carry. Chieng found you. When you saw her you apparently passed out on the spot.”

“What!” Iroh exclaimed in embarrassment.

“Well, I wasn’t there, General,” the doctor replied, amused at his reaction, “but apparently you’d have had a concussion to boot if she hadn’t caught you on the way down.”

Iroh buried his face in his hands, then splayed his fingers to spy the doctor.

“Was anyone else there?” he asked anxiously.

“Oh,” she replied innocently, clearly enjoying the younger man’s discomfort, “why, I believe she did mention that the Qu’ai Tau and the daimyo were there too.”

Iroh groaned. He’d never live this down. Briefly he wondered whether it would have been better to perish before thrusting such unworthy thoughts aside.

He drew a deep breath before continuing.

“The army?”
Her expression hardened.

“Over thirty two hundred dead as of sundown, including Captain Fujiyama of the Inferno and Colonel Jian of Fourth Infantry,” she reported.

“Dear Agni.”

“Could have been much worse, your Highness,” she observed quietly, “and that should be about it as far as casualties go. Everyone who was going to die has gone ahead and done it. The rest we can save.”

She was right. Iroh hated to admit that it was a numbers game, but the idea that they would cross the desert with no casualties had never even been entertained. Three thousand lives or more had been lost, but if the sacrifice meant they arrived at Mequon before Nifong, then he knew it will have been worth it. The young general closed his eyes and shivered in spite of himself.

“How ugly and calculating have I become?” he thought, terror suddenly heightening his fragile senses, “What kind of monster will I be when I am Fire Lord?”

Steeling himself to continue, he looked at the doctor once more.

“How did she do it?”

“Do what?”

“The water.”

Kanjana smiled, “I’ll let her explain that to you herself, but for now, you are going back to sleep.”

“No, please Kanjana, I have to –” he protested, struggling to stand.

“You have to do as I say,” the doctor replied firmly, helping him back over to the bed, “and I’m saying you need to go back to sleep. The army is recovering, the daimyo has everything in order, so let him do his job.”

“Nikon is in command?”

“Yes,” she replied, pushing him gently back under the covers, “and doing just fine. He and the Qu’ai Tau were in better shape than you. Now, General, many others need my help today.”

She spoke to someone outside the room and another glass of water appeared on the little table next to the bed.

“Drink this when you wake.”

He was asleep before she left the room.

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When he awoke the glass beside him was empty and the buzzing in his head was gone. Remembering his mistake earlier, he held on to the bed post tightly as he stood up. This time he found his legs supported his weight.

He walked over to the only door and exited to find himself in the ready room where he had spoken to Chieng weeks ago.
A medic jumped up from the guest chair where he had been seated to salute.

“At ease, soldier,” he said with a smile, returning the salute.

He was pleased that his voice sounded normal.

“Can you help me find my uniform? I seem to have… misplaced it.”

Once properly dressed, Iroh stepped onto the flight deck. The station managers and boiler operators stood up, saluted and returned to their duties. Everything looked normal. The main hatch was open and he could see sunlight outside. It was sunset judging by the angle of the light.

He stepped out. The heat was oppressive, but curiosity drove him forward.

In front of him a huge, shallow body of water stretched into the distance. Corona was parked a few feet from its edge and its shoreline was lined with salt formations. On either side of the lake rock walls sloped gently upwards, giving the impression of residing in a large bowl shaped valley. The sun was setting over the water.

“Hey! There’s the damsel in distress!” came a familiar voice.

Iroh turned to see his daimyo, a huge grin plastered across his face, flanked by two adjutants, one of which was the elder of the two infamous “map buddies.” His lips were still chapped from the desert odyssey, but he was otherwise recovered.

“Are you asking for an agni kai, my friend?” Iroh threatened.

“No way!” his friend responded innocently, “We were all just so very glad that Chieng was there to catch you when you swooned over her dashing rescue!”

The “map buddy” failed to suppress a smile.

“If the doctor hadn’t forbidden me from firebending you’d both be ash piles by now,” Iroh said sourly.

“Oh, so you’ve met our lovely engineer’s mother already, have you? My, my, things are progressing quickly!”

“Her what?” Iroh asked blankly.

“Oh, please, daimyo Orlando,” the elder “map buddy” finally broke in, though he was still smiling, “have mercy on his Highness.”

“Not a chance,” Nikon retorted, the twinkle still in his eye, “this is way too good to pass up, my friend.”

“Her what?” Iroh repeated as if he hadn’t heard the comment.

“That’s Doctor Shiung who treated you,” the adjutant supplied, “She is the chief of the medical section for the technical bureau, and, as the daimyo just noted, Commander Shiung’s mother, wife of Lord Liu Shiung.”

“Doesn’t anyone tell me anything around here!” Iroh roared in frustration as Nikon finally broke down in laughter.

“Of course not,” came another familiar voice behind him, “You’re the commanding officer, so of
course you’re the last one to know anything.”

Iroh whirled to see Gan approaching, a grin on his face, clipboard and stylus in hand.

“You look much better, your Highness,” Gan continued, “glad to see you up and about.”

“Me too,” Iroh replied, “and I’m glad at least someone is pleased about it,” he added, shooting the daimyo an accusatory look.

“Oh, I’m very pleased about it, your Highness!” Nikon jested without a trace of shame.

“What’s the situation?” Iroh asked, deliberately switching the subject.

“We have plenty of water now,” Gan replied, clearly satisfied, “More than enough to get us to the southern escarpment.”

“When can we move?”

“Tomorrow night, at least that’s what Chieng’s mother and the rest of the medical staff are recommending,” Nikon replied, “We’ve been here for four days recuperating from the march.”

“How did she solve the water problem?”

“We’ll show you.”

Nikon led them back up the embankment and into the causeway in front of the Corona. The sun had set while they spoke and twilight rapidly descended. The army lay bivouacked around them, most in holes dug in the hardpan, some in tents. To their left however, rose two huge industrial looking platforms that could only have been fashioned from the remains of two tank trains.

Four enormous vessels, two on each platform, stood supported by metal beams that seemed to grow out of the desert floor. In front of each platform lay huge piles of off white powder. At the base of each vessel groups of firebenders practiced their art in silent unison, pouring out gouts of flame to keep intense heat on the bottoms of the tanks.

As they approached the first of these vessels they could see Chieng and one of her boiler chiefs observing the activity.

She turned as the footsteps grew loud behind her.

“Finally decided to get back to work, your Highness?” she said deadpan, crossing her arms in front of her.

“Well, he had a hard time getting out of your bed, Chieng,” Nikon quipped before he could stop himself, “He said he really liked the smell, like little flowering bushes or something,” then barreling ahead in a tone of mock innocence, “But, I get the impression he hit it off with your mom, isn’t that great?”

Gan nearly spit up with laughter. The boiler chief, after a mighty struggle, successfully contained his reaction. For the first few seconds Iroh did not understand the remark. Then he remembered that he emerged from the bedroom he had recovered in directly into Chieng’s ready room. The moment he realized the truth he wanted to die, his ears and cheeks turning bright red. There was simply no recovery from such a remark. Against his will, he looked over at the engineer.

Chieng shook her head slowly in resignation, her golden eyes fixed on the daimyo.
“You think you’re funny, Nikon, but most of the time you’re still just an immature idiot,” she retorted without a trace of embarrassment, “Sometimes I can’t believe you survived either Myojin or the Ping Tou.”

Iroh exhaled in relief. Chieng would handle the situation.

“Oh, come on, Chieng, we all know you hate fun,” Nikon replied earnestly once he regained control of himself, “but this… this… this is special! It’s too… too good!”

“I do not hate fun,” she huffed a trifle sullenly, “I just don’t consider getting drunk and banging hookers “fun”.”

“Ahhhh, don’t try to change the subject, O mighty dreadnought commander,” Nikon chided, waggling a finger in her general direction and clearly relishing the opportunity to put his newest friend on the spot, “Besides, I’d like to know just what you do consider fun… I bet it bears a striking resemblance to, you know… work.”

Chieng made a noise of disgust.

“This conversation is pointless.”

“Aww, can’t you just laugh a little?” Nikon asked earnestly, “You don’t see any humor here at all?”

“No.”

“You know, on second thought,” Iroh finally managed, remembering the engineer’s barb on the Sulaco, “he probably is the right man to lead the frontal assault on Ba-Sing-Se.”

“Don’t get me excited.”

“Now,” he continued, addressing the daimyo, “if you’ve had enough fun at my expense…”

“Of course it’s at your expense, Iroh,” Nikon quipped, his eyes bulging suggestively, “I’m a poor man, and if it’s not at your expense I can’t afford it!”

Iroh continued, ignoring his friend’s unwelcome interjections, “…could someone please explain to me how we’re getting all this wonderful fresh water?”

“Of course, General,” Chieng responded, equally pleased to change the subject, “the solution, as usual, is simple, but we had to sacrifice both the Phoenix and Sozin’s Comet to make it work.”


“Yes,” Chieng agreed, adopting a similar pained expression, “it does.”

Iroh reflected that perhaps for her the loss was personal.

“So, how does it all work?”

The engineer brightened perceptibly.

“We pump the salt water in using the hand pumps down there – nobody wants that job – to fill up the boilers. Each of the boilers is open at the top, though you can’t see it, because they’re enclosed by those bell-like shields you see up there.”

“The boilers are from the drive engines of the Phoenix and the Comet, right?”
“Yes, they were the only vessels we had large enough to make this work.”

Iroh observed the corrosion and rust spots already breaking out on the surfaces of the nearest vessel.

“What’s going on there?” he said, pointing to the damage.

“Heat and salt water eat metal for breakfast, your Highness. Nothing is more destructive, even to steel.”

“Right, so there is no way to salvage the tank trains at all?”

“No, they’re finished,” she reported emphatically with a shake of her head, “Anyway, we boil each batch, driving off the water, but leaving the salt. We condense the salt free water on the inside of the bell and collect it in the catch basins underneath. From there we pump it over to the tank wagons for storage.”

“How do you get rid of the salt? Doesn’t each batch gum up the bottoms of the vessels?”

Chieng nodded approvingly, pleased at Iroh’s ability to reason, “That was one of the two main problems we ran into when we tested this approach.”

“So what do you do?”

“Solving this one turned out to be easy. Instead of driving off all the water, we just dump it out when we get down to about twenty or thirty percent of the volume. All the salt is still suspended in the water at that point.”

“Where do you dump it?”

“Right here, I’ll show you.”

She turned and yelled something up to the second level of the platform. A boiler operator emerged from underneath the bell and responded with a “thumbs up” gesture.

“Yeh, this batch is done. Back up,” she ordered.

The men backed off while Chieng put on a pair of huge leather gloves and opened a large valve at the base of the nearest vessel. The firebenders working the boiler stopped applying flame and stood down. Boiling water poured from the vessel onto the hardpan in a continuous stream. The engineer backed away to avoid getting scalded.

“When it’s done emptying, we’ll fill it up and start again. When the salt pile here gets too high we shovel it all over to the big mounds over there,” she said, pointing to the burgeoning salt hills close by, “another unpopular job.”

Iroh, clearly impressed, asked, “And the other problem?”

“That was the harder issue, and I couldn’t solve it until we got here. You have to condense the water fast or it’ll just disappear into the bone dry air. My team and I came up with the bell design back at camp, but we figured out fast that we had to cool the condensing surface somehow or the bell would just heat up to the boiling point of water and stop condensing.”

“Don’t worry if your eyes start to glaze over, your Highness,” Nikon broke in, still grinning, “The rest of us stopped listening way before this. She’s a lot more fun when she’s shooting things.”

“His eyes are not glazing over, jerk,” she snapped, annoyed at the interruption, “Unlike you, he is
interested and capable of understanding.”

“How was the problem solved?” Iroh pressed.

“We welded plates of the trains’ exterior armor over the bell to create a water tight metal bladder,” she explained, pointing up to the top of the vessel, “and then we pump water from the lake into the bladder continuously to take the heat out and condense the vapor back to liquid. The lake water is very warm, of course, but it’s still way below the boiling point of water so it still cools effectively. It took us three days just to do all the welding and it’s a pain in the ass to operate, but it works.”

She ended her explanation still looking up at the platform. Iroh absorbed her reply for a moment before he stepped forward and hugged her fiercely. Caught as unprepared as she had been at Nomura, she froze for a moment before returning the embrace. The others observed in silence, for everyone shared the feelings of gratitude for their redemption.

Iroh took one step back, still holding her by the arms so he could look into her eyes.

“I am proud of you, Chieng,” he said, searching her face, “So proud. Can you ever again doubt our faith in you?”

She blinked, unsure of her response.

“We will not waste the chance you have given us, I promise,” the young general vowed.

“I… I know,” she replied wistfully.

“How did you chance upon the idea, I wonder?”

“Well… you gave it to me.”

“I did?”

“Yes, when you made the tea boil, remember?”

Of course he remembered, for he had often thought of his parting with the engineer during his long walk across the wasteland. Embarrassed, Iroh nodded once in affirmation, released her hands and stepped backwards. The others looked away, as if they were embarrassed to be present at a private exchange.

Gan whistled, breaking the short silence, as he inspected the massive salt piles.

“You know this process is worth millions, right, Chieng?”

“Yes,” she replied, reluctantly shifting her gaze.

“Sure, salt is expensive,” Gan confirmed, “or has been historically anyway – up until now its come out of mines. But now,” he said gesturing to the two platforms, “anyone who can firebend and lives by the ocean can make an inexhaustible supply for only the cost of replacing your pot every once in a while.”

“Is that bad?”

“Well,” Gan chortled, “It is if you’re the Fujimoro clan, they’ve had a near monopoly back home for more than a century.”
“Who cares?” Chieng asked with a dismissive wave of her hand, “The Fujimoros are assholes anyway.”

“Oh?” Nikon prompted, he had of course heard of the clan, but as a commoner had no direct experience of their disposition.

Iroh nodded in grim agreement. They were allies of his stepmother’s family and were well known for their cruelty and petty place seeking.

“Too bad we can’t pack up this mountain and ship it back home before the secret gets out,” Gan added regretfully, “we could pay for the whole campaign with this lot.”

“No room, my friend,” Iroh rejoined, “and besides, though it will pain you to hear it, we’re not here to make money. We are here to destroy the enemy.”

“A point that is apparently lost on them, General,” Chieng observed icily, “since they are too busy cracking stupid jokes, indulging in adolescent sexual innuendo and fantasizing over visions of obscene profits to remember the Fire Lord’s orders.”

“Yes, Chieng, we love you too,” Nikon responded with a tolerant grin, clearly meaning his words this time, “but the reminder of our purpose is not inappropriate I suppose,” he conceded.

Turning to Iroh he continued, his expression becoming serious, “We will be ready to move tomorrow night, General. The other thing you should know is the maps were wrong again.”

“How bad?” Iroh groaned.

“This time the error is in our favor,” he reported with satisfaction, “the distance to the lakes is twenty leagues shorter than the charts indicated. If that holds up across the length of the desert, then we’ll have done much better than we thought.”

“We’ll need to,” Iroh declared grimly, “Nifong won’t waste any time.”

“No, he won’t,” Gan agreed, “so remember to pray for rain, my friends, and not for us.”

“I will be happy to,” the young general replied with a quick exhalation of breath, “but first I think I could do with a nice cup of ginseng tea.”
Chapter Summary

The Earth Kingdom army races toward Mequon, but the monsoon rains arrive early...

The rains had come.

The Victor of Lake Myojin observed the scene before him in stony silence. An endless column of ostrich horse cavalry crawled at a snail’s pace down the waterlogged mud path that had once been the mighty Omashu Highway. The monotony was broken only by the frequent accidents which further disrupted progress.

As if on cue, the general’s dark reverie was broken when a rider was thrown from his mount as it stumbled on a loose stone, causing several other ostrich horses to buck and panic as well. The column halted again as the wounded were tended and the mounts led away.

He had not celebrated his triumph at Lake Myojin and neither had the Army of the Granite Mountains. Scarcely had the dead been buried before he issued orders to begin moving south. Nifong had made sacrifice to the Earth Spirit in thanks for the great victory and instantly resolved to strike the final blow against the invaders.

But the rains had come.

South of the Ping Tou Mountains the prevailing winds reversed and in these lower latitudes the weather moved from east to west, bringing the monsoon rains off the Leyte Gulf which dominated much of the southeastern Earth Kingdom. In the distance, far to the south and east under the iron grey sky, they could see the worn out remains of the Granite Mountains, the ancient and eroded peaks from whence the majority of the army had descended so many years ago.

Deng had been young then. They all had been. Time had flown, and now, grizzled veterans who had spent their lives in battle, they dared to hope that the war would be over by the winter solstice. Most had no idea what they would do with their freedom, for they had never experienced it and knew not what it meant.

At first they had made rapid progress, sustained by their hard bodies, their belief in the righteousness of their cause and the hope of final victory. The leagues had melted away as summer turned to autumn. The Army of the Granite Mountains had followed the Coast Road until it ended at the Changbai Forest. There, at the city of Ningbo, the Omashu Highway began its long journey to its namesake city far to the south.

At its head, the army had passed the ancient granite obelisk which marked the end of the Coast Road and the beginning of the highway. Etched deep in its timeless surface the mysterious symbol “75” appeared circumscribed inside a shield. The remains of a monorail line ran alongside the highway, or perhaps the highway ran alongside it, for both were of ancient and indeterminate origin. Nifong had wondered as he passed whether the monorail had once connected Ningbo with Amiganza to the north or perhaps to the great cities of the east and south.

But the rains had come.
Before Ningbo and its decaying monorail line had disappeared from view, the roiling sky had been covered with a layer of thick, black clouds. Thunder and lightning had erupted in fury. Hail had fallen with alarming and unusual frequency, breaking bones and denting armor. The mood of the army swung wildly from confidence and optimism to depression and dark forebodings. Superstitious rumors ran rampant that the Spirits had abandoned them and that disaster was certain if they should continue their campaign against the last Fire Nation colony.

Today the rain had slowed to a fine mist and drizzle, but it never stopped. Not for days, not for weeks. Violent squalls often appeared without notice, drenching everyone to the core. One soldier had gone insane and killed himself by lying in the road and opening his mouth in a sudden downpour. He had drowned in minutes. Such tales had spread horror and despair amongst the army.

Such melancholy thoughts weighed heavily on Iroh’s adversary, but there was little to be done except move forward.

“We’re about halfway there, General,” his aide remarked beside him in an optimistic tone.

“Yes, Captain, but we make little progress, and every day we slow further.”

“Does it matter though, sir?” the younger man responded, “The enemy has been smashed! The lake armies are liberating the Nasu even now and Mequon has nothing but its weakened garrison. What else does the Fire Nation have to stop us? The Army of the Song wastes its strength before the gates of Omashu, and General Li has forced the Army of the Cree Valley to withdraw from the positions it’s held at great cost for three years.”

Nifong did not make an immediate answer. The only response was the drizzle and the slow trickle of men and ostrich horses before them.

“Are you worried about Prince Iroh?” the younger man finally prompted. His commanding officer’s failure to respond unnerved him and demanded he fill the empty air with something besides the sound of the rain.

“No,” the green clad general replied after some thought, “He has his hands full in the Nasu and will probably be hard pressed to escape the predicament his cousin has bequeathed him. Gela is many leagues away from the Yoshi River.”

“If he can rally his men,” the Captain reasoned, biting his lip, “he could defeat the northern armies if he finds a way to separate them.”

“Yes,” Nifong agreed, “he showed considerable skill at Nomura. He does not frighten easily nor does he break under pressure.”

“Are we making a mistake then, General?”

“Time will tell, Captain,” he answered cryptically, his voice uneasy, “though it is certain that the sooner we arrive at Mequon the better.”

At that moment several soldiers bearing a simple palanquin approached. The covering parted to reveal a fat man in green robes with a greasy, drooping beard. He stank of perfume.

“Greetings, General.”

“Wu Ti,” Nifong acknowledged curtly, “Are they ready?”

“Oh yes, General,” the obese servant reported, clearly expecting the question, “I just received word
from the Ningbo Arms Works that both engines are now complete. They are on their way as we speak, though how they’ll get through all this mud I have no idea.”

“Two? We ordered three.”

“Yes, well, they have two completed. The third won’t be finished for another month.”

“Then we will have only two,” Nifong observed with a sigh.

“Why have they failed to honor the contract, Wu Ti?” the young captain inquired.

The fat man’s expression hardened.

“That’s Master Wu-Ti, young man,” he responded officiously, “and the Chief of Staff doesn’t have to explain himself to you, but I suppose I’ll answer anyway for the benefit of our mutual superior.”

Wu Ti turned back to Nifong.

“Raw material, General, they couldn’t get enough of the higher grade steel. Apparently several loads were diverted for delivery down south.”

“No need to ask by whom,” Nifong remarked with a trace of bitterness, “Anything else?”

“Well, my Lord, we did receive another letter from the Council.”

Nifong sighed once again. Of course, it was they who had diverted the steel. He looked briefly up at the sky and was tempted to despair. Even the threat of imminent conquest, it seemed, was insufficient to unite his people. He looked back to his Chief of Staff.

“You read it, of course, so what does it say?”

The fat dandy handed his master a huge green scroll.

“Oh, of course I didn’t read it, General!” Wu Ti replied, placing a hand on his chest in a melodramatic pose of the unjustly insulted, “That would be an unforgiveable breach of professional ethics!”

The Earth Kingdom hero snorted at this and shook his head in frustration.

“Oh go away, Wu Ti, it’s a foolish leader who doesn’t know his own staff.”

“But, sir, what about your reply?”

“How do you know I must reply,” Nifong riposted as he opened the scroll, “if you didn’t read it?”

Wu Ti opened his mouth to answer, but no sound emerged.

Quickly he scanned the note. The Council of Five forbade an attack on Mequon and demanded acknowledgement of the order. No need to ask about the steel indeed. He rolled up the scroll and replaced it in its case. He would burn it later. He had played politics with the Council for years. Today would be no exception.

“I will make no reply, Wu Ti, is that understood?”

The Chief of Staff closed his mouth and nodded once, still dumbfounded both at getting caught and at the General’s unexpected response.
“Now go and make sure the artillery we have paid for so dearly is delivered. We will need it to break
the walls of Mequon.”

The curtain closed and the palanquin was taken away.

The rain fell and the afternoon wore on. The general’s adjutant departed to collect the dispatches
from the second watch. Infantry now marched past the aging general as he watched impassively from
his perch. A heavy set officer riding an ostrich horse approached. He dismounted and came to stand
before his commanding officer.

“Hail, General!” he saluted.


“This weather is killing us.”

The colonel was not known for his subtlety.

“Progress is slow,” the older man admitted.

“It’s not the progress, though that’s bad enough, it’s the men, General. You’ve heard the rumors?”

“Yes.”

“If a man believes he is going to die, it is far easier to kill him than if he believes otherwise.”

Nifong considered this for a moment before replying.

“What is your point, Colonel?”

“If we go into battle in this condition we’ll lose... badly.”

“Battle against whom?”

“Whomever we might face,” Liu answered with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“That’s not an answer.”

“We’re not going to reduce that fortress if the men believe the Spirits have abandoned them,” the
blunt infantry officer insisted. His assessment was almost certainly correct.

“Does Colonel Fong believe the Spirits have abandoned us?” Nifong countered.

Colonel Fong was the youngest cavalry commander in the Army of the Granite Mountains and was
legendary for his twin trademarks of aggressiveness and optimism. Liu hated him for both traits.
Nifong was clearly goading him.

“No, I just saw him this morning,” Liu replied, clearly unhappy at the change in subject, “He’s
happy as a cow pig in shit. I listened to him telling his men that the weather was a gift from the Earth
Spirit, sent to test our mettle before our final, glorious victory at Mequon. I don’t know which was
scarier, Fong’s speech or his officers cheering him on.”

“His men will do anything for him, Colonel. Just like yours. That’s why I promoted him, not for his
admittedly prodigious skill in combat.”

“Fong believes six impossible things before breakfast every day, General,” the infantryman warned,
“He is a great fighter, I grant you that, but he’s reckless. More than that,” he continued stubbornly, “he’s built a division of reckless men and women. I say that’s dangerous.”

“He played his role well enough at Cam’ron and Myojin.”

“Yes, and you should hear him crow about it. He says there’s nothing to stop us this time and exhorts his men with stupid jokes like “last one to Mequon is a rotten turtle-duck egg”.”

“His optimism is of course, legendary.”

“His optimism is not contagious, General, if anything he makes the morale situation worse. While he jabbers on about spirit world challenges and glorious victories, the rest of the army sinks into mud and despair.”

“There will be time enough to dry out and recover our spirits before the ramparts of Mequon,” the aging general countered.

Liu placed his hands on his hips and expelled a large breath.

“Let’s hope so, sir, because at this rate, we’ll need a boat to get there.”

Nifong couldn’t argue with that, so he let it pass.

“Have you despaired then too, Colonel?” he asked finally.

“No, sir,” the heavy set man replied with a grin and a confident voice, “How long have I served you? Ten years if it’s a day. I don’t despair. I don’t hope. I don’t expect. I just do what you tell me to do, or do I what I think needs to be done. Sometimes,” he continued deadpan, “I even have to tell you what I think.”

The Victor of Lake Myojin allowed himself a smile. Liu and those like him would never break.

“Would that every soldier had your mettle, Colonel.”

“Yes, sir, but not my fondness for women and drink,” he prevaricated with a laugh.

“Such things are part of life too, Liu, everything in moderation.”

“That they are, and I thank the Earth Spirit – and Tui and La for good measure – for that! Do you have a woman somewhere, sir?”

Nifong, caught off guard by the question, answered truthfully without thinking.

“Yes… but she is far away now,” he replied wistfully, “I have crossed oceans of time and waged war without end for her sake, but… I never shared my life with her.”

Liu looked at the ground, water dripping from his helmet onto his breastplate. He was a simple soldier, who, like most of the Army of the Granite Mountains, loved his country and his general. Such a confession from the man he revered most saddened him.

“That’s something worth fighting for though, right, General?

“Yes,” Nifong replied with a glimmer of hope, “it is, and I will see this through to the end in the hopes of winning a life with her, Colonel, and no man is going to send me to the Spirit World before I achieve it. Well,” he equivocated, his countenance falling, “unless Fate has decreed otherwise.”
“Let’s not worry about it then, sir, let’s take care of Mequon and let Fate take care of itself.”

Nifong considered this briefly before replying.

“Good advice, Colonel, for I know of no man yet who has escaped his Fate once it has been spun.”

They watched in silence as the column crawled along before them. Soon the rains began to pick up once more, and in the distance flashes of lightning were soon followed by peals of thunder.
They stood on a vista atop the jagged escarpment that marked the eastern edge of the Dune Sea. The sun shone brightly overhead in a cloudless sky. Behind them the desert began almost immediately, its harsh, alien landscape stretching to the northern and western horizons. Hundreds of feet below the grassy steppes of the middle Earth Kingdom stretched for hundreds of leagues to the east and south. A dry river bed snaked from the bottom of the cliff to meet up with a living river that glimmered like a silver ribbon in the distance.

“Son of a bitch,” Nikon commented as he scanned the steppes through his pocket scope.

“At least they haven’t crossed the river,” Iroh observed, looking through his own.

“Which one is it, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” the Crown Prince admitted, “probably one of the big tributaries of the Song. Maybe the Chaophraya? Or the Donetz?”

In the distance the Army of the Granite Mountains moved steadily towards the river. Tens of thousands of green clad soldiers marched slowly across the grassy plain. Columns of ostrich horse cavalry poured through channels in the masses of infantry. Hundreds of wagons, filled with supplies, many towing artillery of various sorts, brought up the rear and stretched beyond the magnification ability of their equipment.

“Man, look at the size of those damn things!” the daimyo suddenly exclaimed, clearly focused on something seen through his instrument.

Iroh pointed his own scope in the direction his friend was looking. After a few moments of searching he saw them. Two massive torsion catapults, far larger than any of the others. The glitter of steel plate could clearly be made out in the sunlight.

“You ever seen any that big before?”

“No,” Iroh admitted, “They have to be eighty or hundred feet tall each, not even our largest warships have engines that large.”

“We can’t let those get to Mequon.”

“No, we can’t.”

The green flood continued to move in slow motion.

“They can’t be more than a few hours from those big bridges over there,” Nikon commented, pointing with his right hand at a bend in the waterway as he squinted through his sight glass.

Iroh grunted in reply. The enemy would ford the river soon.
“We’re not going to make it in time… are we?” Nikon asked after a few more moments of silent observation.

“No, my friend, we made up a lot of time… but not enough.”

Iroh reflected bitterly on the days spent recuperating at the salt lakes. If it weren’t for that delay, they might have made it.

“Yeh… yeh, you’re right,” the commoner agreed glumly, replacing his scope in his tunic.

Nikon kicked the stones at his feet in frustration. They bounced off the edge of the ravine and clattered down the face of the cliff.

“At this rate they’ll reach Mequon days before we do,” the Crown Prince concluded.

“Iroh… I don’t think we can break a siege, especially not against those things.”

The young general did not reply. His friend was right and he knew it.

They had left the Army of the Great Divide the night before as it approached the southern passes of the Dune Sea. The scouts had brought word back that they had finally reached the edge of the desert. The soldiers, sun burnt and weary, nevertheless felt a surge of hope and optimism, for it was clear that the first of their great trials had been overcome.

Iroh and Nikon had decided to see for themselves the expanse of the great eastern steppes and to look for sign of the enemy. They had just seen the realization of their greatest fear. The Army of the Granite Mountains, flowing like a living river of men before them, was winning the race to Mequon.

“We have to delay them somehow,” Nikon vowed, “…but how?”

The Crown Prince looked over the edge of the escarpment. Far below the dry river bed stared back at him. He quickly scanned the stark landscape.

“Look at this,” Iroh commanded suddenly.

Nikon leaned over to see what Iroh was on about. The floor of the dead river immediately below them was filled with boulders and rocks worn smooth by flowing water, but of water there was not a drop.

The remains of a monorail line were also clearly visible in the ravine as it exited into the steppe. Heavily discolored and covered with moss, the once elegant arches lay silent and broken, testimonial to a remote and glorious past of some ancient and long forgotten civilization. Iroh once again recalled the book he had read during the crossing and then had seen once again on the slight engineer’s bookshelf.

“I don’t see anything,” Nikon finally responded, “just a… big gully.”

“No, not the river bed,” Iroh clarified, “the cliff wall.”

“The one across from us?” asked Nikon, pointing across to a narrow finger of cliff opposite them.

“No, underneath us, look.”

The young commoner leaned over as far as he dared. The cliff face underneath their feet was not only smooth, it was utterly featureless. The cliff wall was concave and along its breadth a darker rectangle of stone was clearly seen.
“Wow!” Nikon exclaimed, “What the hell is this?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What happened to the top of the cliff face?”

“What do you mean?” Iroh asked in turn.

“Well, look, there’s nothing there – the cliff face just stops,” Nikon said, pointing to the left and below them, “There’s a cavern back there or something.”

Iroh looked to where he and Nikon could observe the top of the cliff wall underneath them. All he could see was blackness. The daimyo was right, the featureless cliff was a wall of some type. They were standing on top of some kind of enormous cave.

“Great Agni…” Iroh breathed, finally realizing what he was seeing.

Quickly the young general stood up. He looked around, finally turning back to look behind them.

“What?” Nikon queried.

“The ruin, come on,” Iroh broke in suddenly, slapping Nikon on the shoulder, “let’s see if there’s an entrance.”

“An entrance to what?” the young commoner asked, clearly confused.

“Remember that book I read during the crossing, my friend?”

Nikon did a double take. First he looked at the dry river bed and then the living river in the distance. The dust trails showed the Army of the Granite Mountains had almost reached the bridge over the tributary of the mighty Song.

“You’re kidding, Iroh, are we really that desperate? I mean that thing was just full of fairy tales wasn’t it?”

"The monorails are real enough, we’ve both seen them now and how many times," the Crown Prince replied as he spread his hands wide, "and besides, you just said yourself we have to delay them somehow. We better hope this is what they talked about in that book or I’m afraid we have no hope at all."

“Right!” the tank commander exclaimed, putting his doubts aside, “Let’s go!”

Quickly they retraced their steps. Their komodo rhinoceros mounts were tethered in a lonely copse of evergreen trees nearby. These were the first real vegetation they had seen since they left the Nasu. In the midst of the trees lay the remains of a house that had long ago fallen into ruin. What had once been neat, black iron shutters lay scattered in rusted heaps amidst piles of broken glass. Lit by the same sun as the endless desert they had crossed, the heaps of crystal shards reflected like jewels with a thousand facets.

A single stone gate, perhaps the width of two people, opened on to a short stone path that led to the remains of the front door. Next to the gate a square, white metal post rose from the ground. On top of the post was a metal box painted light blue. The front of the box was open, a broken and rusted hinge the only indication it had once had some kind of lid or cover.

They walked through the gate and climbed the flagstone steps up to the house itself. The stone
foundations of the house rose out of the ground to various heights indicating where many of the interior walls had been. A large stone staircase rose halfway to a long since collapsed second floor, and a room towards the back of the floor plan held the rusting remains of a large cook stove.

“This has to be centuries old, right?” Nikon suggested.

“I’m no judge,” Iroh answered, “but it is certainly old.”

“Why was it built way out here? The Dune Sea was here long before this thing was built, no matter how old it is!”

“Yes, my friend, that certainly is true, but I suspect, if our hope proves correct, that this place was a way station or entrance to a larger complex of some sort.”

Nikon cast his gaze about, but for the life of him he couldn’t imagine anything standing here but a small stone house. How this could possibly be connected to the gigantic cavern beneath them was beyond his grasp.

“Okay, what are we looking for?”

“I don’t know,” Azulon’s son admitted, “But I’m afraid the only way forward is down, my friend, so let’s look for a basement or a tunnel or something. If we don’t find a way in here, we’ll have to search the cliff tops.”

The young commoner made a face.

“That sounds like a wild boar-q-pine chase, Iroh.”

“Right, so I suggest we find it here!”

They split up and started searching the ruin. Kicking over stones and thrusting aside layers of pine needles and underbrush revealed nothing except a layer of burned material, suggesting the structure had burned down long ago. The various doors on the rusted stove could not be opened no matter how hard they tried and they decided it wasn’t worth the effort to melt it.

Suddenly Iroh heard his friend whistle. He hurried over to where his daimyo stood at the backside of the staircase they had observed when they first entered.

“I see,” he observed, “Makes sense.”

Before them a second staircase descended into the earth directly beneath the remains of the stairs leading to the missing second floor. The flight of stone stairs, wide enough to comfortably accommodate six or more people, quickly disappeared into the darkness.

Nikon grinned.

“Well, shall we?”

“Yes,” Iroh replied, grinning in turn, “I think we should… in fact, I think we must.”

The young general opened his palm and a bright orange flame sprang forth. He descended the steep stairs into the blackness below, his friend close behind.
Riddles in the Dark

Chapter Summary

Iroh and Nikon explore the abandoned way station, relic of a remote and glorious past.

The staircase descended through several wide landings. The thick matte of pine needles, forest debris and dirt which covered the stairs near the entrance quickly gave way to bare concrete. Metal railings appeared on each side after they arrived at the first platform. The air became steadily cooler as they progressed and soon the outside light failed completely.

At the bottom of the stairwell the pair found themselves before a rounded archway with metal pocket doors protruding from housings on either side. Even in the flickering light of Iroh’s flame the doors were obviously damaged. They had been bent inwards with tremendous force, their ends shredded so viciously that their edges were now heavily serrated.

Without a word Nikon turned to squeeze himself through the dangerous gap in profile. Iroh followed, careful to avoid the jagged edges of the shattered doorway.

Once through they found themselves in a long featureless hallway which ran perpendicular to the stairwell. Bits of metal from the broken doors littered the floor and made tinkling sounds as their feet inadvertently kicked some of them around.

Iroh walked across the tunnel to the opposite wall. Thick metal tubes or cables were fixed to the sides of the tunnel with large metal fasteners that appeared every so often. One of the cables was periodically punctuated with large ovals of frosted glass held in a metal frame. Dark and opaque, they looked to the Fire Nation soldiers like the milky, cataract stricken eyes of some nameless cave dwelling horror.

“What the hell is this place?” Nikon asked with a mixture of wonder and fear.

“No idea, my friend,” Iroh admitted.

Nikon looked up and down the hallway. To the left the corridor stretched into the gloom without any obvious exits. To the right a few other archways could be seen.

“I don’t like this, Iroh,” the daimyo confessed, “I don’t know what this place was for, but it was built for lots of people to use… but now, empty like this… it feels… haunted or something.”

The young general didn’t reply. He didn’t like the place either. The air was now cold and carried with it the faintest scent of putrescence. A deep and disturbing silence reigned when they were not speaking or moving, subliminally prompting them to fill it with any manner of noise lest the perfect stillness drive them mad.

Iroh was reminded once again of the book he had read during the crossing. Mere minutes ago in the sunlit world above the book had offered hope, far-fetched as it might be, of redemption. Now, in this strange tomb, he remembered the many dark passages it contained.

Shrouded in legend and metaphor, the book had given scant detail on specific places, people and events. The author had, however, been clear on the ultimate destruction of the ancient world and the
long string of successor states which had clung desperately and ultimately unsuccessfully to the way of life lived by their ancestors. Whatever age this outpost belonged to didn’t matter, whoever built it had met an unpleasant end long ago.

Iroh shuddered to think Nikon might be right and hoped they would meet no malicious spirits.

“Which way, I wonder?” Iroh muttered to himself as he scanned the hallway as his friend had moments before.

“Looks like there are other tunnels down there,” Nikon observed, pointing down the length of tunnel to their right.

“I think that direction takes us away from the cavern or cliff face or whatever it is, but it’s a little hard to tell down here… all right, let’s go that way first.”

They moved down the corridor. It was as wide or a bit wider than the stairwell in which they had descended. The ceiling was arched as well with another thick, metal cable running along its topline. The cable was punctuated with white frosted glass spheres, larger than the oval ones on the wall. Each of them was suspended from the ceiling by a pair of metal supports.

After a short while they came to a four way junction where archways of the same size intersected the hallway they were travelling. The pocket doors on these archways were closed tight. Above them a sign hung suspended from the ceiling, but the symbols were faded and unreadable even after Iroh illuminated it with a quick burst of flame.

Just beyond the intersection a doorway opened to their right. Here again obvious damage was seen. The wooden door had exploded inwards into the chamber beyond. Stepping through into the room, Iroh held his lighted palm aloft, Nikon in tow.

The room was full of overturned desks and other furniture in an advanced state of decay. Huge mounds of what once had probably been paper were strewn about the room. Cabinets of various sizes had been tipped over, their contents sacked. The walls between this large room and several small neighboring rooms had been blown open, sporting huge gaping holes one could stick one’s head through. The intact wall to their right was covered with what looked like a chalkboard, but it was blank.

They stepped deeper inside, kicking aside some of the decayed paper and wood. Nikon produced a flame in the palm of his own hand and picked up a few small wooden objects on the floor next to one of the overturned desks. They had short stubby handles and wide heads stained with ink.

“Stamps or seals, I think,” Nikon speculated before dropping them, “Some kind of office, maybe?”

Iroh didn’t respond, instead walking over to the short hallway visible behind the largest of the broken pieces of furniture. Nikon saw Iroh’s flame intensify for a moment as he walked into another chamber off the short hallway.

“Over here,” the Crown Prince invited.

Nikon hopped lightly over a broken chair to gain the passageway. He emerged behind Iroh in a small room that served as the antechamber to a walk in vault. The vault’s huge, heavy door lay on its side, largely melted, its hinges twisted and broken.

The vault was empty.

“Guess we aren’t the first ones to discover this place,” Iroh observed quietly.
Nikon ran a hand over the crazed and melted edge of the massive door.

“What the hell could have done this? You can’t tell me someone did this with firebending.”

Iroh looked over at the damaged colossus.

“No, I don’t even think your blue fire would be hot enough for that… besides it looks like something ripped the whole thing right out of its housing, at least judging by those hinges.”

They looked at each other for a moment, unspoken fears communicating between them.

“Hey,” Nikon suddenly offered to break the silence, “let’s get the hell out of here, okay?”

The air smelled stale and the walls seemed to close in about them. They left the way they came and proceeded down the hallway once more. Another opening appeared on their right, but this was a metal hatch with a large threaded screw protruding from its middle. It was painted a faded red and had a metal plate at eye level which had raised symbols on it that neither Iroh nor Nikon could interpret. They passed it and moved on.

Suddenly the floor beneath their feet became covered in a layer of sand, dust and pebbles. Moments later the tunnel in front of them abruptly terminated in a mass of concrete, stone and shattered metal supports. Iroh once again projected his flame higher to provide a singular view of the obstruction. A cave-in or some other calamity had blocked the entire passage and prevented further progress. They spread out, looking for a way around the obstruction, but to no avail.

"Not going any further this way," Nikon concluded with no small amount of relief, then continued in a tone of exasperation, "Man, what the blazes happened here? And what was it all for? I don't get it.”

Iroh grunted and kicked at some of the metal and concrete at his feet. He bent down as his eyes detected a glint in the fire light.

He stood up, holding a clear yellow crystal in his hand.

“Huh!”

“Pretty,” Nikon agreed, coming over for a closer look, “A gemstone or something?”

“I think so, it’s been polished, but it feels too heavy for a gemstone.”

He handed it to Nikon who felt its weight before returning it. Nikon in turn knelt down and fished something out of the wreckage. He stood up. Iroh brought his flame closer. His friend held a slightly rusted slender handle of metal. Nikon turned it over in his hands only to have it unexpectedly split in half to reveal a nasty looking knife.

“A switchblade,” the daimyo observed wistfully, swinging open the folding cover in one smooth motion, locking it open, “A dime a dozen back in Shinjuku, but the blade is steel, not iron.”

“I see you know how to use it.”

Nikon snorted, “Somebody else did too,” he held the blade closer to examine its rust colored edge, “This was used quite a bit and not for whittling sticks judging by the stains on the blade… Anyway, where I grew up, we all knew how to use these. Before I learned how to firebend this is how I survived.”

“Is it Fire Nation make?”
“I think so, but like I said it’s a poor man’s weapon, never seen a steel one before.”

He dropped it back in the rubble with a clatter.

After a few more minutes poking around and finding nothing further of interest, they returned the way they had come, Iroh’s flame illuminating the left wall and casting crazy shadows along it.

They passed the stairwell to the surface in silence except for the crunch of metal and glass under their feet. Soon the tunnel turned sharply to the left. Signage which had clearly hung from the ceiling long ago lay on the floor covered with a thick layer of dust. They wiped it off, but could discern no markings.

After a short distance the tunnel ended in a thick metal door that had no obvious lock or handle. It was smooth, featureless and seamless. Iroh rapped on the featureless wall of metal. The sound it made was dull and weak, as if absorbed by the material itself.

“Solid,” Iroh concluded.

“Yeh, we’re not getting through that either, are we?”

“No, my friend, I bet we could firebend that thing all day before it melted... if it ever melted.”

They were flummoxed.

“Head back, I guess?” Nikon finally asked in a hopeful tone, “I’ve had enough riddles in the dark for today.”

Iroh nodded, swinging around so his fiery palm now illuminated the wall opposite. Halfway back to where the tunnel turned back to the right, Iroh’s flame revealed a slightly recessed doorway they had missed the first time through. Iroh pushed the door and it opened noiselessly. The space inside was dark.

“Let’s try this,” the Crown Prince commanded before he stepped through.

Nikon failed to suppress a low groan, but followed without hesitation.

The room was small with a low ceiling, and was largely occupied by what looked like a boiler, though it was rectangular instead of the more familiar pot belly shapes they were used to seeing in the Fire Nation. The vessel was as dark and silent as the room it occupied. A fine, but solid layer of dust stood mute testimony to the many years that had passed since it had operated. Pipes emerged from its smooth surface and bent at crazy angles only to disappear into the walls.

Iroh expanded his flame slightly to examine the unit as Nikon passed behind him to the opposite side of the small room.

“There’s a passage over here,” the daimyo called out from the other side of the boiler, “and a staircase going down.”

Iroh moved behind Nikon and peered over his shoulder. The passageway in front of his friend was narrow and dark, but they could feel slight air movement. The stairway to their right was made of unpainted metal and descended into blackness.

The daimyo mounted the top of the stairs, lit a flame in the palm of his hand and began to descend. He barely went three steps before he splashed into water.
“Oh for Agni’s sake!” Nikon cried with disgust, “It’s flooded.”

Iroh came to the edge of the stairwell and could see the blackness rippling in the wake of Nikon’s splashing. The water looked oily and sinister.

“Yes, and I suppose that’s promising considering what we hope to find. Still, I too wonder what the purpose of all this was. Why build all this underground? At the edge of the desert?”

Nikon backed out of the stairwell, clearly unhappy at having soggy boots.

“Did the book mention the ancients had a drug problem?” Nikon remarked sourly as he tried in vain to shake the water off his feet, “I bet that’s why they all died, overdosed on dope or something.”

Iroh ignored his friend’s cynicism and instead motioned with his hand at the narrow passage before them.

“Oh, all right,” Nikon acquiesced with a heavy breath before stepping into the tunnel.

A short distance later the passage terminated abruptly at a metal hatch, rounded at its edges. It was featureless save for a large metal wheel in its center, similar to the red door they had seen in the main tunnel. They looked at each other briefly before Iroh backed up to allow his daimyo enough room to try the door.

Nikon grasped the wheel in his hands and twisted first one way, then the other. Grunting with effort the wheel turned slowly at first, then faster. The wheel was mounted on a screw and it moved outward along its’ thread until the hatch opened with an audible pop. The daimyo glanced quickly at Iroh, and then pushed lightly on the hatch.

The door swung noiselessly outward to reveal a wonder of the ancient world.
Chapter Summary

Iroh and Nikon delay the Army of the Granite Mountains by sacrificing a wonder of the ancient world.

The hatch opened onto a long concrete platform. The dull gray surface was dimly illuminated by natural light coming from their right. Nikon stepped gingerly over the threshold and out onto the concrete. Iroh followed suit, extinguishing the flame he had held aloft in his hand.

The edge of the platform, perhaps ten feet in front of them, was painted or dyed a bright yellow. Beyond lay a single metal rail that ran alongside its entire length.

These observations momentarily escaped the Fire Nation soldiers; however, for what lay beyond the platform and its lonely rail captivated them instantly. The edifice hung suspended over a dark, still lake that extended farther than the eye could see in a cavern that felt large enough to hold the fleet that had brought them over the sea. The rail alongside the platform was supported at regular intervals by thick metal columns that emerged from the water without a trace of rust.

To their right the cavern opened into daylight, its mouth large enough to frame a city. The water terminated at a low barrier of unnaturally smooth, brown stone that jutted a few feet above its surface and ran from one side of the cavern wall to the other. Hundreds of feet across, the stone barrier restrained a massive amount of water.

It was a dam and without any doubt the mightiest engineered structure either had ever seen.

The platform extended a short distance over the top of the dam, ending roughly where the roof of the cavern ended. The rail ended, twisted and broken, a few feet beyond the edge of the platform.

On their left the sunlight rapidly failed and the cavern turned first to shadow, then utter darkness. The concrete surface extended perhaps half a mile in that direction before it was lost in the gloom, though the distance was difficult to judge.

“What do you say about those fairy tales now?” Iroh asked in wonder.

“I take it all back!” his friend exclaimed in response, “This is incredible!”

The daimyo turned around to look back from where they had emerged. The cavern wall was neatly tiled up to the height of a single story building. The tiles were laid in an attractive pattern of whites, blacks and greens that repeated in identical blocks every ten feet or so. The top and bottom three rows of tiles, however, were a striking cerulean blue. Two of the nearby blocks that should have had tile arrangements, however, instead had intricate mosaics.
“Hey, look at this!” Nikon called out.

Iroh tore himself away from the magnificent spectacle to see what his friend was talking about. He saw the mosaics and stepped forward to examine the closest.

The background of the mosaic was white. A single blue line constructed of tiny glass beads ran along almost its entire length. At regular intervals along this blue line, larger blue crystal spheres were mounted. Characters appeared above or below each of the blue spheres.

He pulled out the crystal he’d picked up in the tunnel and compared it to the ones in the mosaic.

“They don’t look the same,” Nikon observed as he stepped closer.

Iroh agreed. The crystal in his hand was oblong and translucent. Those mounted in the mosaic were opaque, smaller and perfectly round. He put the yellow crystal back in his pocket and returned to his study.

Several of the mosaic’s crystals were larger than the rest. Iroh traced his fingers over one of these larger spheres. It had a blue center but was surrounded by a neat rim of green crystal. From this sphere a different line, this one green, extended to the upper right and lower left corners of the mosaic. This line, similar to the horizontal blue line, had many larger spheres of green with different labels attached to them. One of the crystals on the blue line had a pair of golden arrows pointing to it from above and below.

Red, orange and white lines intersected the blue and green lines at other points, each at a larger, multi-hued sphere. A couple of the spheres lay at the intersection of multiple lines. These were distinguished by clear crystals. Many of the lines ended in neat loops, some of which had larger crystals in them, while others did not.

“A map maybe?” Nikon offered, “I can’t read most of the writing… It is writing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“A monorail station then? And this is the system map? Looks like the ones we saw in Edo anyway, though these are like… works of art compared to those.”

“Makes sense,” the young general agreed, tracing a finger across the line of blue crystals, “but this monorail didn’t rely on earthbending.”

“How do you know that?”

“The rail is made of metal, see?”

“Yes…” Nikon agreed, turning to examine the rail quickly, “never seen that before, but why –”

“Because,” Iroh inserted, anticipating the question, “they need stone rails to repel from in order to move their trains. These wouldn’t do earthbenders any good.”

They examined the map for a few moments in silence.

“Can you read any of it?” the daimyo asked finally.

Iroh looked at him in some surprise.

“What makes you think I can read any of this?”
“Well… you did go to the Fire Nation Academy and had all those tutors and stuff! Besides, you’re the one who read the book, right?”

“That’s true, my friend,” the young general replied a trifle absently, returning to his study of the mosaic, “you were too busy making unsavory jokes and baiting Tien Shin to do anything useful like reading fairy tales about underground dams.”

Nikon laughed, and pointing to the map once more, prompted, “So, any ideas?”

“A few…,” he mused thoughtfully, “this one,” he pointed to the last sphere on the right side of the blue line, “says “OMAHA”, which I think is one of the old names for Omashu. That was in the book. So was this one,” he said, pointing to a large, clear sphere about a third of the way down the line, “If I remember right this says “WEST PORTAL” or something like that.”

“Never heard of it,” the daimyo stated, shaking his head.

“Me neither, but the book said that city was destroyed in ancient times by a three headed monster that shot lightning from each of its mouths.”

“A dragon?”

“No, not a dragon,” Iroh clarified in a slightly hushed voice, “much larger, at least according to the description. I didn’t think much of it at the time… but, since the dams and the monorails are real…”

“Let’s hope not,” Nikon replied, expelling a deep breath, “we have enough problems without anything like that… Is this where we are now?” the daimyo continued, pointing at the blue sphere bracketed by the arrows.

“Seems likely, I suppose.”

“Yeh, I guess it does, but why is it the only label that uses modern writing?”

The four symbols next to the crystal bracketed by the gold arrows said clearly, “FLOOD CONTROL DAM THREE.”

“The rest use all those weird ancient scripts or… I mean, what are those? What do these say?” Nikon interrupted himself, pointing to the labels attached to the crystals in the upper right hand quadrant of the green line. Nikon didn’t any recognize any of those symbols. Traditional writing and its ancient variants all used multiple strokes to create characters. These symbols looked as if they were each made all at once, with many exhibiting rounded edges.

The end of the green line was labeled “AIRPORT” and the stop before it “METROPARK.”

“I don’t know,” Iroh admitted, “I’ve never seen writing like that before.”

“Do you see Ba Sing Se anywhere on here?” Nikon asked, before pointing at the blue crystal ringed in green, “Is it this one?”

“No, at least I don’t think so. I can’t read that one, but I think that one there might be Amiganza,” the young general guessed, pointing to the blue crystal two stops to the left of the crystal with the golden arrows, “again I think its Kanji script… looks like it would be pronounced “Amagansett.”

The young commoner pointed at a clear crystal that lay at the junction of three lines.

“What about this one?”
Iroh examined it.

“Not sure, looks like “LIBRARY.”

They regarded the mosaic for a few more moments before Nikon drew a quick breath.

“All right, I’ll go see if there’s anything more further down.”

Nikon left Iroh to his examination and set off down the platform. He soon arrived at a huge archway; the other side of the blast door looked just as grey, dull and impenetrable as the other side had.

“Here’s the other side of the main entrance,” he called out as he passed.

The daimyo continued walking before he stopped once more. The regular pattern of tiles was here again disrupted, this time by four very large tiles that each contained a symbol. To his right another mosaic, identical to the first, was dimly visible in the shadows.

“Well, no doubt about it now,” he reported, raising his voice to ensure he would be heard, “there’s another system map over here and some of the tiles in between it and the main entrance say “FLOOD CONTROL DAM THREE.” I’ll say one thing, whoever built this place must have had some pretty damn long trains!”

Nikon’s eyes failed to pierce the gloom deeper in the cavern, so he turned and walked back to his commander.

Iroh had turned to survey the lake once more.

“I still don’t get it,” Nikon puzzled as he rejoined his friend, “I mean if they didn’t use earthbending, how did they make the monorail work? And what did they build all this for anyway? There doesn’t seem to be any running water.”

“I don’t know that either. All this water had to come from somewhere though. Maybe the source dried up or goes someplace else now? Anyway, it’s a mystery we don’t have time to solve.”

Together they walked towards the cavern’s exit. Wind began to stir their hair as they drew near. The end of the platform terminated in a cul de sac, clearly meant to provide a scenic view of the dam and the valley it protected. From that position they could see the whole height of the dam. The dry river bed lay underneath them hundreds of feet below.

Nikon whistled.

“Agni Almighty, have you ever seen a dam this big before?”

“Not even close,” Iroh replied, “the biggest one I know is back home - the one at Shenzen, but that’s nothing compared to this. You could fit the whole capital in this cavern!”

“Yeh, no question about it,” Nikon agreed, then, in an awestruck voice, “Maybe this was… a tourist attraction or something. This has to be one of the great wonders of the world.”

The Crown Prince put his hands on his hips. He looked out across the ravine where another finger of the escarpment blocked their view of the steppes and the green clad army they knew was moving against them.

He turned back to Nikon.

“Yes, it is,” Iroh agreed, then with a wistful expression, “I wish Chieng were here to see it.”
Nikon cast a side long glance at his friend, but made no comment.

Iroh sighed and continued with a mock rueful expression, “It’s probably just as well she isn’t here, though, since we’re going to have to destroy it. What a shame.”

His friend grinned. Iroh answered with one of his own.

“Yes, too bad, isn’t it?” Nikon replied, making a “tut-tutting” noise, “Well, hey, if this is “Flood Control Dam Number Three”, that means there are at least two others, right? The world won’t miss this one, will it?”

They both laughed.

Iroh looked up to the sky. The sun continued to shine brightly overhead. The two Fire Nation soldiers were bathed in sunlight as was the entire face of the dam.

“Not a cloud in the sky, but I think there might be some thunder and lightning soon, don’t you?” the Crown Prince japed, elbowing his friend in the tummy.

“Why, yes, General, I think there might be!” the daimyo agreed heartily, adopting his superior’s tone of mock innocence.

Suddenly Nikon held up one finger in a motion of deferral. He quickly knelt down on the edge of the platform and took a quick look underneath.

“Just wanted to check how this thing is supported,” he explained, “it’s not attached to the dam, it’s got metal supports coming out of the cavern wall.”

“Good thinking,” Iroh agreed as he began to remove his chest armor.

Soon both of their burnished breastplates lay beside each other in the sunlight.

Nikon rubbed his hands together, the silly grin still plastered on his face.

“I have to admit, I really like to just blow things up!”

“Shhh!” Iroh admonished with mock severity, “We’re supposed to be celebrating the power of Agni on Earth! Not acting like a couple of kids blowing off fireworks at the solstice!”

The Crown Prince’s face became serious, his friend’s followed suit.

“Let’s hope the sacrifice is worth it.”

Nikon nodded once in agreement. Jokes aside, they knew what they were about to do.

Iroh and his friend began to regulate their breathing, each drawing to themselves their inner chi. They stepped away from each other, maximizing their room to maneuver and widening their stances to the point where they appeared bandy legged. Each found his root and prepared to strike.

“Aim low,” Iroh commanded in a low voice, “We have to hit the base, and pace yourself, this will almost certainly demand multiple strikes since the bottom is probably where the dam is thickest.”

After a few moments pause and a single full breath, both executed a series of identical, graceful movements. In unison they swung their left arms in a wide semicircle. Blue sparks instantly began to dance around their hands and finger tips. As their left arms completed their swings they began the same motion with their right arms. With their arms crackling and popping with the same energy as
their opposite, both men brought their middle and index fingers of each hand together.

Aiming down, they separated their fingertips to release their charges simultaneously through their left arms. Lightning shot forth in jagged blue bolts towards the smooth, featureless surface of the dam. The blows struck the target at its center, hundreds of feet below them. A large cloud of vapor instantly erupted from the impact site, followed by a huge shower of ejecta that rained down into the canyon.

“Again!”

Lightning arced once more from their hands, perspiration springing from their foreheads with the exertion. Within moments of the second impact, huge cracks appeared from the edge of the crater and spread across the whole face of the dam.

They stood still after the second discharge, breathing heavily. Every few seconds ominous echoes from the cavern, as if from the shifting of some enormous weight, reached their ears. The rolling thunder continued to echo even as the vapor dissipated and the stone fragments rained down into the canyon.

“You sure this platform is secure?” Iroh asked, his eyes shifting from the dam to the hatch a few hundred feet away.

“Well, no,” his second in command equivocated, “I said it was supported from the cave wall. I’m not an engineer, I have no clue whether it will hold when this thing goes or not.”

Water suddenly erupted in several large jets from the damaged area. The ominous echoes grew louder, joined by the noise of stone grinding on stone.

“It is too bad Chieng isn’t here,” Nikon shouted over the din, “Never thought I’d ever hear myself say that!”

Iroh shook his head in disagreement, “She’s safer where she is. Get ready to run. When it goes it’s going to go all at once. The moment it collapses we have to run for that hatch.”

Nikon nodded, already drawing his breath for the next and probably final assault on the dam.

The moment they discharged their next gout of electricity, several things happened at once. The dam had stood pristine for countless years, its smooth surface seemingly immune to the effects of time. Now, weakened by the lightning strikes, its lower mid-section gave way. A massive wall of water erupted from the gaping wound, followed almost instantly by massive chunks of the dam itself.

The platform and indeed the world began to shake violently. Iroh and Nikon both struggled to retain their balance and lost. Nikon rolled over twice before his body swung off the edge. Iroh hauled him back up by his forearms as the top of the dam gave way. The sound of rushing water rang in their heads like a bell and made conversation impossible.

As the Fire Nation soldiers stood they saw the river bed below submerged beneath hundreds of feet of water which flowed out of the gully in a torrent. They grabbed their armor and, barely able to keep their balance, ran down the platform towards the hatch. The water level of the lake had already dropped significantly, revealing another ten or twenty feet of the metal structure which supported the monorail line.

Nikon jumped into the open hatchway without looking back. Iroh spared a single backwards glance in time to see the rest of the dam give way with a hollow, thunderous boom. He followed his daimyo and shut the door, spinning the wheel as fast as he could to secure it tight.
Once more they stood on the vista, but this time the view through their sight glasses was far different. Below them the formerly dry channel still roiled with huge amounts of muddy water that rocketed towards the steppes in a vast deluge.

The bridges they had seen before were gone, the river they had forded swollen beyond belief into a monster mightier than the Song.

“Sparks and flame, Iroh, just take a look at that!” Nikon exclaimed.

His companion declined to respond, instead calmly surveying the scene below them.

The Army of the Granite Mountains was now almost entirely surrounded by water. Huge tracts of low lying land had flooded when the river had overflowed its banks. The vanguard of Nifong’s army lay bunched on the opposite bank of the newly engorged channel, cut off from the main body. Many other smaller groups were similarly marooned on hastily occupied high ground.

“That’s going to take a few days to get around at least,” Nikon ventured with satisfaction, “even if they still have waterbenders.”

Iroh, his mood once again somber, replied, “Let’s hope it’s enough.”

When they had fully absorbed the spectacle, they turned and made their way back to the ruin. They mounted their steeds in silence and made haste to rejoin their comrades in the desert.
Mequon

Chapter Summary

Iroh and the Army of the Great Divide finally arrive at Mequon to meet the woman who holds their fate...

The young cavalryman beamed, his smile as brilliant as the sunshine above them.

“I told you so, didn’t I, General?” he said, his voice strong, confident and devoid of rancor.

“Yes,” Nifong agreed, “You did.”

The older man found himself unable to suppress the contagious optimism of his companion. Liu had been wrong on that score at least.

Finally the rain had ended. The clouds had broken and the sun was at last seen once more. The army’s spirits recovered, though the ground remained a muddy soup which kept progress slow.

Then the flash flood had come from the southwest in a rage, carrying before it men, ostrich horses, and huge chunks of rock that smashed everything in their path. A large swath of the Omashu Highway and the two mighty stone bridges that had forded the Chaophraya from time immemorial had been washed away within minutes.

The shock brought morale to a new low, as the bodies floating around the freshly marooned army reminded everyone of what they had done to the enemy at Lake Myojin. Men whispered that the spirits had sent the flood in retaliation.

Days passed before the waters receded enough for the army to move. Suffering from hunger and dehydration, for it was known that flood water was often not safe to drink, the army slowly fanned out to find a place where they could ford the channel.

Colonel Fong and his men had found easy passage at an oxbow bend in the river many leagues to the southeast. Here the water cascaded across a sandy bank of loose stones and was never more than a few feet deep.

The general and his subordinate watched from their mounts as Fong’s vaunted Seventh Cavalry cantered across the ford. Two massive catapults, famous already to their enemy, each pulled by a dozen ostrich horses, had just gained the far bank. Prepared in secret for the express purpose of smashing the mighty metal walls of Mequon, they were named for the twin Spirits of the Underworld, where even the Avatar dared not tread.

“We can get the whole army across in two days, sir,” Fong continued, “even towing these ridiculous artillery pieces I can have my division at Mequon in a week!”

Fong’s estimates were unrealistic, but that was not his main concern. Nifong considered Liu’s warning before replying.

“No, Colonel, I understand your enthusiasm, but don’t let it turn to impatience. If the whole army we’re lined up, yes, I agree it would take around two days, but it isn’t. Right now you, Jenju, and
Kwan are the only outfits ready to cross. The rest of the army is split up over thirty leagues in all directions.”

“But, sir,” Fong responded with a twinkle in his eye, “why not move as fast as possible and surprise them? We might even take Mequon without a fight! That’s what they did to us on the Nasu. I’d like to pay them back for Shiminoseki and Ratchadamri! Besides,” he added, leaning forward in his saddle with a placid smile, “Think of the lives we could save.”

“No, Colonel,” Nifong repeated with a trace of sternness, “You are not to attack Mequon unsupported. That is a direct order. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Fong replied, perplexed, but clearly unabashed.

“I have placed Colonel Jenju in charge of First Cavalry Corps – and that includes you. Do as she instructs, and for my part I’ve instructed her to make sure proper scouting procedures are followed and that the column moves at regulation pace to avoid unnecessary exposure.”

The younger man looked genuinely confused.

“I don’t understand, General, Prince Xian and his army have been crushed,” he asserted with a wide sweep of his hand, “Iroh and his infantry are flailing around on the Nasu. Mequon has a weak young girl for a governor and the garrison is nothing but children and old men. This artillery will smash their walls to pieces within hours. There’s nothing to stop us this time! What are we afraid of?”

“Afraid?” Nifong asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Well, uh…” the brash younger man hesitated, aware that he had probably made a mistake.

“We are afraid of nothing, Colonel,” Nifong contradicted.

“Yes, sir,” Fong quickly agreed, “I only meant…”

“And why are you so certain there is nothing to stop us?” his superior abruptly cut in, “What evidence do you have to support that conclusion?”

The young colonel decided not to risk a reply, instead allowing his superior to continue after a pause.

“The answer is… you don’t. You’re making an assumption – and a baseless one at that.”

“Yes, sir,” Fong agreed once more, now slightly abashed. This wasn’t the first time he’d been admonished for the offense.

“And for what it’s worth, Colonel, I hope you’re right, I really do, but until the Earth Kingdom’s flag waves over Mequon we will act as though Fire Lord Sozin himself stands in our way.”

At that moment Nifong’s adjutant appeared. He saluted his superior and the young colonel beside him.

“Welcome, Captain!” the cavalry commander said, his expression of chagrin vanishing instantly, returning the salute with a broad smile, “Are you ready to finally kick the Fire Nation back where they belong?”

“Yes, Colonel,” the aid replied with a matching smile, “I am!”

“That’s the spirit!” he said, raising a fist in hearty approval.
“Yes, sir, and all the men are betting your division will be first to the gates of Mequon!”

“Well,” he replied with a laugh and a wink at the General, “our commanding officer has ordered I slow down a bit, but I wouldn’t bet against me!”

“All right, Colonel, that’s enough high spiritedness for today,” Nifong capitulated, then with a shooing gesture, “go now, rejoin your outfit and remember my instructions.”

Fong saluted, his brown eyes full of laughter and hope, turned and kicked his ostrich horse into a gallop.

The southern escarpment of the Dune Sea rose high in the distance behind the fortress city of Mequon. The craggy, uneven cliffs stretched to the sky from east to west, broken in several places by wide gaps through which the wastelands could be seen at the higher elevations. The Army of the Great Divide had reached this southern extremity of the Dune Sea on the calends of the eleventh month and arrived at the gates of the great Fire Nation colony two days later.

The massive iron walls of Mequon, black as obsidian, seemed almost to absorb the morning sunlight that bathed the subtropical steppe on which it stood. On three sides the city was surrounded by river, the mighty Yangtze, which emptied into the Western Ocean over a thousand miles away, and one of its tributaries. A drawbridge spanned the Yangtze at its narrowest point, connecting the fortress to the urban sprawl which dominated the east bank of the channel. A small crowd of city dwellers, their expressions somber, watched the procession in silence.

Red clad soldiers guarded the bridge and the nearest edge of the highway that ran along the river. Their uniforms, slightly antiquated and deep maroon in color, marked them as members of the city garrison.

Near the bridge a granite obelisk lay on its side, the mysterious symbol “80” inscribed within a shield etched deep in its surface. Similar to the obelisk outside of Ningbo, the highway and its marker were far older than the city, and not one of its inhabitants could read it nor knew its purpose. They knew the mighty thoroughfare only as the Silk Road, oldest and greatest of the arteries that once sustained ancient world.

Corona sat dark and still on the eastern bank opposite the entrance to the fortress. Iroh and his staff crossed the bridge in full dress uniform, red feathered plumes springing from their burnished helmets. The colonial guards who lined each side of the bridge pulled their spears straight in salute as the young general passed.

Under the great metal gate a woman stood tall in a blazing white kimono with wide crimson borders. She was young, though her countenance was careworn. Unique among her companions, her hair, tied in a topknot and secured by a Fire Nation hair pin, was the color of corn silk and her eyes a deep blue. Around her were several men and a few women in red and maroon Fire Nation outfits as well as a single Fire Nation officer in uniform.

Iroh came to a stop in front of the woman in white, his company a mirror image of hers. She regarded each of the young general’s companions in turn, smiling briefly at Gan in recognition, and skipping over Tien Shin. Her eyes came to rest on the Crown Prince. She smiled broadly, her face betraying a rapidly shifting mixture of emotions.

“Hail, General Iroh,” the woman greeted with a deep bow after concluding her survey, her voice sonorous but grave, “Mequon and her loyal citizens bid you welcome.”
Her companions bowed low to the general and his party. The Crown Prince inclined his head slightly in recognition of the governor’s bow, while the rest of his staff replicated the governor’s obeisance.

“Greetings, Governor T’zan,” Iroh responded formally.

Tien Shin alone refused to bow and instead fixed the governor with a direct stare.

“We rejoice at the arrival of the Army of the Great Divide,” she continued, pointedly ignoring the elder prince, her voice amplified so that the larger audience could hear, “and have made preparations to receive the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation with the honor and respect which are his due.”

Tien Shin glowered slightly at the obvious omission.

“I thank you, Lord Governor,” Iroh replied, “the offer of your hospitality is much appreciated, though I fear we will have precious little time to enjoy it.”

“We were also greatly saddened, your Highness,” she offered, her voice becoming taught, “to receive news of the defeat at Lake Myojin. Prince Xian was the best of men. His death is a great loss to us and to the Fire Nation.”

A shadow passed over Iroh’s face, though he hid it well with a bow of his own.

“Yes, Governor, the enemy has proven resourceful. We underestimated him and we have paid for it with our dearest blood,” then, relieved to change the subject he knew they must address again in private, he asked, “May I ask if you received our messenger hawk?”

“Yes, we received your communication weeks ago.”

“Excellent,” he replied, relief washing over him, “did you obey my instructions then?”

“I did.”

“I can ask for no more, Lord Governor,” the Crown Prince vowed graciously, “The Army of the Great Divide will prevail in this struggle, and the Fire Lord himself shall hear of the part you have played in our victory.”

The regal woman hesitated to reply and Iroh could not help but notice the lack of enthusiasm shown by her retinue.

“Indeed, General,” she confirmed finally, “we can only hope for a great victory.”

“Our first and greatest obstacle has already been overcome,” the young general offered boldly, “We have achieved the impossible and marched an entire army across the Dune Sea.”

“A great achievement, your Highness,” she agreed, “and only by your sacrifice and daring can we hope for deliverance from the enemy.”

Satisfied with this response, Iroh motioned to his companions.

“Allow me to introduce my general staff, Governor, some of whom you already know.”

Iroh quickly made introductions. The woman in the white kimono smiled and exchanged greetings with each, save Tien Shin whom she refused once again to acknowledge.

Nikon, remembering Iroh’s admonishment about “that girl” and his disastrous introduction to Chieng
long ago, acquitted himself without embarrassment. Chieng eyed the governor with some suspicion and returned her greeting stiffly, in contrast to her mother’s gracious response.

Once the introductions were complete Iroh continued.

“Have you received any word of the enemy?”

“Yes, only hours ago,” she confirmed, “Let us go inside, General, and continue our discussion.”

Iroh nodded and followed the fair haired governor, his comrades following close behind.

She led them deep into the interior of the fortress. Down a long hallway lit by gas lamps a pair of two story bronze doors opened into the governor’s audience chamber.

The floor of the great hall was occupied by a mosaic portraying Fire Lord Sozin and his family at the height of his power and glory. The ceiling molding was a marble frieze that depicted the major victories of the first twenty years of the war. The sides of the room were occupied by artificial streams that were supplied by fountains at the head of the room. A single curule chair occupied a small dais in between the fountains and was flanked by a pair of large braziers with open flames. An enormous tapestry of the Fire Nation flag hung behind the chair, suspended from the ceiling.

Governor T’zan motioned to the servants who stood by the braziers. They disappeared through a portcullis and returned carrying a large oval table. They put the table down in the middle of the chamber and spread out an ornately decorated map on its surface before resuming their positions.

Much smaller in scale than the large campaign maps that Iroh’s entourage carried, this chart focused on the equatorial region of the Earth Kingdom. The Dune Sea marked the northern edge of the map, while the Yangtze and its tributaries dominated the center. Far to the east, the Granite Mountains and the Leyte Gulf could be seen as well as the northern bends of the Song River. At its southern edge the beginnings of the Si Wong desert could be observed.

Many roads, cities and villages dotted the map. Strange symbols appeared in many locations that Iroh did not recognize but which seemed to follow a large key inset in the lower right hand section of the chart. It looked more like a piece of art than the utilitarian surveys used by the army.

“Quite beautiful,” Gan remarked.

“Yes, Gan,” she replied wistfully, “it’s thirty years old, made when our fortunes were much better than today.”

“Is it accurate, Lord Governor?” Nikon inquired, concern evident in his voice.

“It is now, daimyo Orlando, we’ve spent the last several weeks updating it,” she said, indicating some new marks on the map with chagrin. The edits did not spoil the overall effect of the chart, but they were clearly not of the same quality as the original workmanship.

“I have had two copies made, smaller, but serviceable.”

“Excellent,” Iroh replied with approval, “your forethought does you credit.”

She bowed at the compliment, but replied somewhat ruefully, “Thank you, General, but I’m afraid we will need more than maps to prevail.”

“All right, Governor,” the Crown Prince sighed, her hints too obvious to ignore, “Let’s have it. What have you heard?”
“Much, my Lord,” she replied, “The moment we received your messenger hawk we sent scouts to the east and south. We tried to keep the information secret, but within days everyone in the city knew Nifong and his army were approaching. We had to evacuate to avoid a panic. Normally we have a population well over a hundred and fifty thousand. We might have twenty now, most of them old and sick. The rest have gone to Yu Dao and to the allied states on the western coast.”

“The garrison?” he questioned, unable to keep hope from his voice.

“A little over four thousand,” she replied unhappily, “they are, of course, yours to command.”

Iroh nodded once and motioned for her to continue.

“Several days ago we received word that the enemy was moving towards the Chaophraya crossings. The Army of the Granite Mountains hasn’t been seen in these parts for many years, General, but if these reports are accurate then it has grown considerably since then.”

Governor T’zan handed Iroh several sheets of paper containing dispatches from the scouts.

“This looks like more than what we observed on the Nasu,” he said after scanning them.

“They’ve added siege engines and artillery, which makes sense,” Nikon agreed after Iroh passed them to him, “… and this is more cavalry than we saw at Myojin.”

“They didn’t need to show all their cavalry at Myojin,” Tien Shin injected, in his first comment without rancor Iroh could recall since he returned, “all they had to do was bottle us up on the lake shore.”

“What else?” Iroh prompted.

“Less than a day later we received this,” she said, handing Iroh another transmission, “A flash flood apparently wiped out both of the bridges across the upper reaches of the Chaophraya and flooded a huge expanse of the eastern steppes.”

Iroh and Nikon exchanged a quick glance at this while the rest of the group looked stupefied.

“You know about this then?” the governor asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Something about it, yes,” Iroh confirmed cagily, “but we weren’t sure.”

“Apparently it took days for the water to drain,” the governor continued, “and to find a place for them to ford the river. We are very fortunate. If it weren’t for that the enemy would certainly have arrived before you.”

She turned to the solitary army officer that was part of her staff. He was a tall, middle aged man with a self-assured manner.

“General, this is Lieutenant Colonel Zhou, garrison commander of Mequon. Colonel, please repeat the information you brought us this morning.”

“Yes, Governor,” he replied, picking up the wooden pointer left on the table by one of the servants.

“The enemy crossed the Chaophraya two days ago here, General,” the colonial officer began, using the pointer to indicate an area on the chart, “They’ve met no resistance, since we have none to offer.”

“Describe their disposition.”
The garrison commander complied. Within a few minutes he had described the strength and distribution of Nifong’s forces according to the latest reports. When finished with his description Iroh made eye contact with both Nikon and Tien Shin.

“Well, again, it makes sense, he can’t have any reason to think there is anything between him and Mequon,” offered the daimyo.

“Nifong must be confident indeed,” the elder prince commented, “This is very convenient.”

“How chance they’ve sighted us yet?” Gan questioned.

“Not likely,” Zhou responded, “They’re moving too fast now for anything but close range scouting.”

“Are you sure about the length of the column?” Iroh pressed.

“Yes, General, the vanguards are moving much faster than the main body of the enemy.”

“Who’s out front?”

“Fong’s Seventh Cavalry and two other as yet unidentified cavalry units, though we think one of the others is Jenju’s outfit,” Zhou reported, indicating a position forty leagues to their east, “They are probably three or four days away.”

“What are these markings, here, near Vyazma?” Tien Shin asked suddenly, his expression creased in concentration as he pointed to a small group of circles on the map.

The governor reacted to this comment as if startled. She looked to where the elder prince pointed and then over to Iroh, her eyes wide. He met her gaze briefly before she looked back to the map, an impassive mask sliding over her face like a veil.

“That’s the Field of Coins, your Highness,” Zhou replied, “a relic from Fire Lord Sozin’s second campaign.”

“You mean earthbender stone disks, the big ones?” Iroh asked, surprise evident in his voice.

“Yes,” the governor replied, “hundreds of them. Father tried to have them destroyed when we first arrived, but there were just too many.”

Iroh leaned over the map, both hands on the table.

“Risky, but we’ll have to use it.”

“Use it for what?”

“A trap, Governor,” Iroh replied, “a less ingenious trap than the enemy’s ruse at Lake Myojin, but hopefully just as irresistible.”

Nikon, tapping his chin with his fist, observed, “We’ll need to move out fast then.”

“I don’t recommend that, General,” Kanjana broke in, “The army needs two days of rest at least. The crossing has left even the hardiest of soldiers exhausted.”

Standing next to her daughter Iroh could now easily see the resemblance.

“One, Doctor,” the Crown Prince countered, “that’s all we can afford.”
Kanjana was clearly unsatisfied with this response, but could see from his expression that Iroh would not relent. She pursed her lips and nodded once in acquiescence.

“Then for the next day the Army of the Great Divide will enjoy the hospitality of Mequon,” the governor declared, “We have few people left, but we will share our bounty and our labor to help prepare the army for battle.”

“Thank you, Lord Governor,” Iroh replied, “your aid is much appreciated.”

“It is my duty.”

“You are selective in the duties you choose to perform, Rhiannon,” the elder prince inserted, finally speaking to the governor directly, a hard, calculating look on his face, “Should we prove victorious, you must return with us to the Fire Nation. You have obligations and duties there long left unattended.”

The blonde haired woman turned to Iroh’s step brother, acknowledging him for the first time and addressing him with open contempt.

“Within the bounds of this province I am Lord Governor, Tien Shin,” she replied, her expression as hard as her voice, “and you will address me with respect or I will have you arrested, a practice with which you are intimately familiar. I do not need you to remind me of my duty, and I will serve here as long as it is the Fire Lord’s will that I should do so.”

“I will make sure to discuss that with him when I return,” the elder prince purred, a look of smug satisfaction on his face.

She regarded him for a moment before replying, her mind clearly considering the threat.

“Leave us,” she commanded.

The volume of her voice made it clear that she addressed the larger group, but her eyes remained focused on the elder prince.

“I wish to speak with your superior in private.”

Nikon and Gan shared a quick glance before moving to withdraw. Chieng bristled at the dismissal, but quickly joined them. The rest followed closely, save Tien Shin.

“You can’t hide here forever, Rhiannon,” he observed ominously as the last of her staff exited the room, “You can’t escape. The sooner you accept your fate the better off you will be.”

Hatred burned in her eyes as the elder prince turned and walked out of the chamber.
Rhiannon

Chapter Summary

Against her will Iroh bades Rhiannon to reveal her vision...

As soon as the doors closed behind Tien Shin the governor stepped forward and hugged Iroh fiercely.

“I am so glad to see you, Iroh, thank Agni you’re alive,” she began, her voice thick.

“I’m so sorry, Rhiannon,” he replied, gripping her tightly in return, “I know you loved him.”

“Yes, I did, so much,” she agreed through tears, “How, Iroh? How could this have happened?”

They released each other and after he removed his helmet, Iroh recounted the central events leading up to Lake Myojin and all that happened after. At the end he produced his cousin’s final epistle and handed it to her.

She finished the letter and sobbed bitterly. He took the letter back as she wiped the tears from her fair skin, her eyes closed in grief.

“He knew you loved him, his last thought was of you,” he said, trying to comfort her.

“Yes, but that isn’t enough,” she confessed sadly, “I wanted a life with him.”

She opened her eyes, her look now cold and hard.

“I am only glad that you are in command instead of that… that reptile,” scorn dripped from her voice as she uttered the last word.

“And as long as I command you have nothing to fear from Tien Shin,” Iroh vowed.

“No,” she agreed, her countenance still frozen, “as long as you command… but he will never forgive me coming here instead of marrying him as your step-mother willed. If anyone has destroyed our happiness, Iroh, it is her.”

“Lady Ila is, I grant you, a formidable opponent,” he conceded, unable to keep the bitterness from his own voice.

“You must be careful,” she continued, placing a hand on his shoulder, “You have prevailed for now, but you are in danger as long as Tien Shin lives.”

“I know, just make sure he doesn’t get his hands on any messenger hawks.”

“Yes, I read your letter,” she said with a wry smile, “He won’t send any communications to the capital from Mequon, I promise.”

The young general thought for a moment before laying a hand on top of hers and replying.

“You are wise and always were,” Iroh squeezed her hand and looked down, “Maybe now I have
finally learned the lesson that Father tried to teach me before we began this campaign.”

He looked up to see her eyebrows disappear under her bangs, prompting him to continue.

“That I am in constant danger and surrounded by enemies,” he explained in a tone of resignation, but then added with a smile, “but if that is true, it is also equally true that I have the greatest of friends who will see me through.”

She matched his smile, her expression instantly softening, though her eyes were still red from the tears.

His smile evaporated.

“I’m sorry about your father. We should have come, but father forbade us.”

She looked down, her smile vanishing as well.

“I know.”

“What happened? Gan had doubts about the official reports and you refused to address it in your letters to us. None of us knew what to believe and father wouldn’t speak of it. Was it the Dai Li?”

“No… No, it wasn’t,” she replied in a mysterious tone, “and though I did find some of the people involved in his murder, I haven’t yet discovered what actually killed him.”

“What?” Iroh questioned with a perplexed expression, “Don’t you mean ‘who?’”

“No,” she replied, her expression stoic, “I don’t.”

Iroh shook his head in dismay. He knew her moods and it was clear she would not elaborate.

“We should have come,” he repeated in a tone of sullen distress.

“There was nothing you could have done, Iroh… and we don’t have time for it now.”

He nodded, for he knew she was right. Changing the subject, he began again, his smile returning.

“I am so glad to see you, Rhiannon, though I never expected it, even if it is under these terrible circumstances. How many years now has it been?”

“Six.”

“Six years!” he exclaimed incredulously, “You know Gan of course, but Nikon, Chieng and her mother, Lady Kanjana, will be new to you.”

“That’s Liu Shiung’s wife and daughter, yes?”

Iroh nodded. Briefly he explained their respective roles, highlighting Chieng inventions and astounding achievement in crossing the desert as well as her caustic nature.

“You sound very impressed with her,” she observed.

“Well,” he replied, suddenly flustered, “shouldn’t I be?”

“I suppose you should,” she replied, the smile in her eyes spreading to her face, “She has her mother’s strength, but she seems a lot like her father.”
“Yes,” Iroh agreed quickly, recovering his composure with a wry laugh, “I don’t remember meeting her father, but tact is apparently not something that comes naturally to the noble house of Shiung.”

“I suppose tact isn’t necessary for inventors and engineers, but it is required for us,” then, tapping him on his shoulder, “not that Xian and I could ever get you to see that.”

“It is,” he admitted with chagrin, “as I am only just learning. You come by it naturally from your own father. He would be so proud to see you now, a successful governor like him.”

“Yes, he would, but I would do anything to have him back,” she vowed, “I came with him to avoid a forced marriage to a man I hate. I never wanted to be governor nor did I ever think it a possibility.”

“That may be why you came, but I doubt very much that is why you have stayed.”

“No, it isn’t, but I hoped he would give up on me all the same,” she said in exasperation.

Iroh smiled at his friend, wondering whether she knew just how beautiful she was.

“You are a tremendous prize for my step brother, Rhiannon, and you know why. The noble house of T’zan’s wealth and power is second only to my own, and is much more closely related to the imperial family than his mother’s. I suppose I am fortunate that I don’t have a sister.”

Her expression soured further at this and murmured, “You make it sound as if he wishes to strengthen a claim for the throne.”

“Do you doubt his ambition?” Iroh replied softly, “I don’t.”

The young governor shook her head slowly.

Silence fell over them like a soft, familiar blanket. Her expression grew apprehensive as she saw the question she dreaded forming in her friend’s brown eyes.

“Now, Rhiannon…,” he said finally, “tell me truly…what have you seen?”

She made no immediate reply.

“I saw your reaction when Tien Shin asked about Vyazma and the Field of Coins. You’ve seen something, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” she answered, unconsciously starting to wring her hands.

“What did you see? Please…I must know.”

Rhiannon looked away and walked over to the curule chair. She turned and sat down. Iroh followed her, placing a foot on the arm rest of the chair and placing his arm on his knee. He stared at her intently.

“Please,” he repeated softly, for he knew what it would cost her to tell him.

She replied after a short silence, her eyes fixed on the floor in front of her.

“Iroh, don’t make me…,” she whispered, “It won’t help you.”

“You don’t know that,” he contradicted gently, “If Xian’s letter had reached my uncle before the Battle of the Song things might have gone differently. Now, tell me.”
Her hands clenched tight, she closed her eyes and began.

“I saw the downs of Vyazma ablaze in a sea of fire, and bloody combat rage across the steppes… I saw the enemy attacking the outer walls of the city… huge tracts of it lay in ruins… I knew then the war would soon return to Mequon, but I did not know how.”

“When did you see this?”

“Before your messenger hawk even arrived,” she replied, opening her eyes to look at him, “I sent the message you wanted long before I ever heard from you. Whether it will help us or not… I do not know.”

He took her face in his hands.

“Rhiannon, you may have just won the war for us.”

He kissed her forehead and released her.

“I want to believe that. I do.”

She turned her head slightly, regarding him now from only one eye. Clearly there was more.

“What else?” Iroh prompted.

Her eyes closed again, and her forehead creased in concentration as if trying to recall a distant memory.

“I saw… an enormous lake, black and still in a vast cavern… I saw the enemy himself kneel in prayer over the body of a fallen comrade… and…”

She looked up at him then suddenly, her eyes suddenly shimmering with unshed tears.

“…and I saw… I saw you, Iroh, led away from the Fire Lord’s palace… in chains.”

He stood up and looked down at her. Silent tears cascaded down her face once more.

“Was that all?” he asked finally, his voice unnaturally calm.

“I’m sorry, Iroh,” she said failing to answer his question, “I’m so sorry! I don’t understand! I don’t know whether you will win or not! I don’t why you will be in chains! I see these awful things, but never enough to do anything about it! I hate this! I hate it so much!”

She buried her face in her hands and began to sob once again. Iroh placed his hands on her head and ran one hand gently through her blonde locks in a gesture of comfort, though he looked past her into blank space.

“I know, Rhiannon,” he remarked somewhat absently as his mind absorbed the disturbing vision, “and I’m sorry I had to ask.”

She raised her head, wiped away her tears and pulled his hands into her own.

“How could this ever happen, your Highness? How could this be?”

Iroh refocused his attention on his friend. He briefly recounted his conversation with Gan as they crossed the desert and the public threats issued by Tien Shin upon his unwelcome return.
“So you see,” Iroh concluded bitterly, “there’s a chance I will be arrested whether I win or lose, but if I am defeated, your vision will certainly come to pass. Tien Shin will make sure of it.”

“Then let’s arrest Tien Shin now!” she cried, standing up, “I will do it on my own authority! I won’t let you –”

“No!” he shouted, terrified that she would suddenly call for the guards to carry out her vow, “We can’t! We can’t just kill him! We have no grounds! Unless he accepts an agni kai it’s murder, you understand?”

She only wrung her hands in reply.

“Besides, Tien Shin doesn’t matter! If I lose and survive to return home what do you expect my father to do with me!?”

He pushed her gently back down onto her seat.

“Will we lose then?” she asked finally in a small voice.

“What else can it mean?” he asked in an equally low tone, “Yet what else can I do, but go on? The only way to ensure that your vision comes to pass is to give up – or kill Tien Shin outside of an agni kai. Anyway, maybe it doesn’t matter… isn’t the fate of the Fire Nation more important than one life, even my own?”

Once again she made no response.

Iroh sighed. He knew there was no answer, neither for him nor for Xian. Unbidden the memory of his cousin’s final letter rang clear in his mind.

I have pressed on for many reasons, but none as potent as the certainty that the fastest way to end this war would be to lose it. Even in death I cannot help but do everything in my power to avoid that fate for the country I love beyond measure.

He hadn’t fully understood what his cousin had meant with those words until now. Yes, he would go on for the sake of the Fire Nation, no matter his personal fate. There was simply no alternative.

Thrusting these thoughts aside, Iroh continued.

“When you foresaw my uncle’s death long ago, how did you know the Battle of the Song would be lost as well?”

She looked up, unprepared for the question. She gathered her thoughts before replying.

“Um… because I remember seeing the earthbenders raise up rock partitions between our formations. I saw our soldiers try desperately to scale the walls to help their comrades, but fail. I watched the enemy cut them to pieces one regiment at a time.”

“So you actually saw the battle?”

She nodded, clearly unhappy and rapidly growing exhausted with the questioning. She knew with Iroh’s arrival it was inevitable, but the inevitability made it no easier to bear.

“But not this time?”

“No, not this time,” she confirmed.
“All right, well, at least I can clear up the part about the lake.”

She looked at him expectantly. Quickly he related the story about the underground dam, the monorail station and the massive flood he and Nikon had created.

“Here’s the crystal I found,” he concluded, drawing forth the polished stone from a pocket.

She took it in her hands, her brow furrowing.

“Ever seen a gem like that before?”

“No,” she replied, her countenance troubled, “but it looks like something I read about once… part of a matrix table perhaps.”

“A what?”

“Never mind,” she said quickly as she handed it back, “Keep it safe somewhere, I don’t think it’s important now and it’s probably not dangerous on its own.”

Iroh regarded the crystal for a moment before taking her hand and placing the crystal in her palm.

“No, you keep it. If it’s worth something it’s safer here with you than going with me into battle.”

Rhiannon hesitated, but then inclined her head in acceptance. The crystal disappeared into a fold of her kimono.

“Who else knows about all this?” she asked, concern evident in her voice.

“We told Gan. He was of course immediately intrigued and wanted to go see, but I decided against it. I ordered them not to speak of this to anyone.”

“Why?”

“Because it raises a lot of questions I’m not sure anyone should answer,” he replied with some hesitation, “That book talked about a lot of other things that, if dug up, could be very dangerous.”

“I’ve read it, Iroh, who do you think gave it to Gan in the first place?”

“Really? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“No, you shouldn’t. I am surprised, however that you read it,” she said with wry amusement, “I remember you saying things like “a warrior doesn’t need to read” and “the Fire Lord has people to read things for him” when we were little.”

“Things have changed… I’ve changed, I think,” Iroh admitted introspectively, “Xian might even have made me a tea drinker,” then, before he could stop himself blurted, “Chieng has a nice ginseng tea that I think I really like.”

“Oh?” she prompted, a slight smile playing on her lips.

“Yes,” Iroh confirmed, but escaped further elaboration by returning to the earlier subject, “but anyway, I don’t know where that monorail line goes, but it clearly didn’t work on earthbending.”

Her smile faded as he described the system map on the wall of the monorail station.

“I could read a few of the station names. Omashu was called “Omaha”, Amiganza was called, I
don’t remember exactly, but something close to that. There were a bunch of names in some language I didn’t recognize at all. Some city the book called “West Portal” was on it too. Apparently it was destroyed long ago by some enormous monster.”

“Yes, Ghidorah,” she supplied automatically.

“What?”

“The ancients gave the terrifying monster that destroyed West Portal the name of Ghidorah. It destroyed the last vestiges of the ancient world before it was finally defeated. Some say it was killed by the Avatar, others say it was driven away by the awesome weapons still wielded by mankind in those days… after the wars, plagues and disasters came that transformed the world forever.”

Iroh paused, his expression thoughtful.

“Where did you find the name? It wasn’t in the book.”

“That isn’t the only source on the subject, Iroh,” she replied with some trepidation. The young general frowned in confusion.

“You read the book, didn’t you? Alhazred,” she pronounced the name of the author fluently, though it was clearly of foreign origin, “indirectly referenced a lot of other works, and…,” her voice dropping to a whisper, “that isn’t the only book Alhazred wrote.”

“So, where did you find them? Did you read them?”

She hesitated.

“Like my father’s murder, we don’t have time for such things now,” she concluded finally, her voice suddenly strong and confident.

She stood up and Iroh backed up to allow her to take a few steps forward. The governor’s eyes, now hard, locked with Iroh’s.

“Yes, you were right to conceal what you found. There are other, darker mysteries even than Ghidorah down that road. Disaster and madness will be the only reward for those who foolishly choose to tread there.”

“You’re scaring me, Rhiannon… I saw the dam so I believe in these things, yet you seem to know much more about them than I.”

The governor eyed him speculatively, wondering how much to reveal. Iroh saw the hesitation and suddenly the questions came tumbling out, one after the other as his mind processed the possibilities.

“What do you know…? What could you know…? What is there to know?”

She looked away. Iroh sighed as he watched her struggle. Rhiannon had always been this way, full of wisdom and secrets. Always intriguing, often infuriating, and, to boot, she was usually right. Still, they were no longer children and this was not a game.

“I have seen the past as well as the future, Iroh,” she finally responded in a bleak tone, “and I have seen no good in either.”

A moment passed as they regarded each other in silence.
“All right,” he said with a sigh and raising his hands in mock defeat, “as you say we have more pressing problems anyway.”

“Yes,” she agreed, relieved to escape the prior subject, even if it meant considering the destruction of her present home, “Nifong approaches. How will you deal with him? I didn’t fully understand the conversation in council. Why would you ever want to fight them in the Field of Coins? They already outnumber us badly, why fight them where they have the advantage of such weapons?”

Iroh smiled.

“I will explain tomorrow. Come to the camp in the morning and I will show you.”

She agreed and smiled in return, trying and failing to banish from her mind the image of her friend in chains.
Chapter Summary

Gan receives an unwelcome new assignment - one that will play a critical role in the upcoming battle that will decide the fate of the Fire Nation.

“So, what are we here to see?” Nikon asked, folding his arms across his chest.

They stood before the east gate of the colony’s great outer wall. Not as high as the inner keep, the outer walls were nevertheless several stories high. Guard towers appeared at regular intervals, as well as flat firing platforms occupied by large ballistae. Behind the wall, spaced in between the platforms and guard towers, torsion catapults waited patiently to greet unwelcome visitors. Except for the two towers flanking the east gate itself, however, none of the fortifications or artillery pieces was manned.

Two tank trains, complete with their towage, were parked on either side of the gate. Their names, painted in gold leaf, appeared dull on an overcast morning. One read Inferno, the other, Firestorm. Technicians and boiler operators swarmed over each. Chieng stood next to the Inferno, giving orders and supervising the preparations that were underway.

“Here to see?” Gan huffed, “We’re here to see a massive waste of money, that’s what we’re here to see!”

“Now, now, Gan,” Iroh admonished, raising a finger in the gesture he had unconsciously adopted from his cousin, “behave in front of the Lord Governor.”

Rhiannon smiled. She stood as she had received them the day before, resplendent in her crimson bordered kimono, her face framed by her platinum locks.

“He’s teasing you, Gan,” she said finally with a small laugh. Iroh joined her.

Nikon had the distinct impression this was a scene that had played out countless times before and was ashamed to feel a twinge of jealousy. He felt excluded, an unpleasant sensation he was not used to feeling around his friends.

“Oh, I know, Rhiannon!” the accountant acknowledged, clearly unamused, “but he won’t find it funny when the War Ministry presents him with the bill for all this!” he concluded with a sweep of his arm in the direction of the dreadnoughts.

“The Qu’ai Tau is upset over something, General,” Rhiannon observed, tongue in cheek, “But I haven’t the faintest idea what he’s talking about, do you?”

“No, Lord Governor, I haven’t a clue,” Iroh played along, “especially since we left a couple mountains of salt in the desert that he told us could pay for the whole campaign.”

“Would someone please tell me what’s going on?” Nikon quailed.

“Now you’re both teasing me,” Gan accused, ignoring the daimyo completely, “some things never change, do they?”
“Of course not,” the governor conceded warmly, “would you really have it any other way?”

Gan sighed and shook his head. He had met Rhiannon at the keep and escorted her to the eastern staging area. They had clearly used the opportunity to catch up, and despite his ill temper, the Qu’ai Tau was happy to see the woman he regarded as his elder sister.

The governor turned to an obviously confused and exasperated Nikon.

“If it helps, daimyo Orlando,” she said archly, “I am just as much in the dark as you are.”

Suddenly the object of her complete attention, Nikon struggled desperately to resist the temptation to flirt with Iroh and Gan’s beautiful friend. He felt certain Iroh would kill him if he did.

“I’m surprised to hear that, your Excellency,” he replied with a smile and the slightest cocking of his head, “It seems there is little you don’t know.”

The governor shifted her eyes instantly to Iroh, though her smile did not waver, then back to the daimyo.

Catching the reaction and realizing his mistake, Nikon moved quickly to recover. As his fellow soldiers and many women in the capital were aware, though for widely different reasons, he was good under pressure.

“Pardon me, Lord Governor,” he prevaricated with an easy laugh, “I just mean you seem very well informed based on the excellent briefing we received yesterday.”

She paused a moment to study the young man from the commons who had become the boon companion of the Crown Prince. The question raised by his remark flitted about the edges of her consciousness.

“I have to be daimyo Orlando,” she finally replied, her smile widening, “and that’s why I’m here. General Iroh bid me join you this morning to demonstrate why offering battle in the Field of Coins is a good idea,” cocking an eyebrow and turning to Xian’s cousin she continued in mock severity, “rather than one of his usual ill-considered and impulsive decisions.”

Chieng had approached the group while Rhiannon spoke, her expression turning hard as she overheard.

“General Iroh’s decisions are neither ill-considered nor impulsive, Lord Governor,” she countered coldly, “Your colony would have no hope of survival were it not for the quality of his judgment. You would do well to remember that.”

Rhiannon regarded the engineer evenly. Her eyes flicked over to Iroh whose ears were burning. He was about to speak when the governor graciously bowed her head in acceptance of the admonishment.

“I am thankful indeed for the general’s presence, Commander,” she replied, then added with the smile she had suppressed moments before, “in more ways than you know.”

Chieng bristled at this response. Nikon grinned widely in amusement while Gan looked back and forth between the two women, his expression carefully neutral.

“What she means, Commander,” the young general began lamely, trying to salvage the situation which had suddenly and unaccountably deteriorated, “is that…”
“What I meant,” Rhiannon cut in, deciding Iroh had suffered enough, “is that you are, of course, correct, Commander. I meant no disrespect. General Iroh, the Qu’ai Tau and I were friends in our youth and we used to tease each other constantly. Old habits are just hard to break.”

Chieng was clearly unsatisfied with this response, but as she could find nothing overtly wrong with it she simply nodded.

Nikon drew a breath to comment, but wisely let it die after a single frigid glance from the engineer.

“Besides, Commander, I wager the General has summoned me here to witness the power and glory of your divine creations,” Rhiannon continued with a majestic sweep of her hand, “and I freely admit I have never seen a more glorious expression of our nation’s superiority than your mighty dreadnoughts! Your father must be proud.”

Whatever she was, and she was many things, the young governor was both charismatic and persuasive. The change of subject caught the engineer off guard, who replied hesitantly.

“Yes, Governor… my father is very proud.”

“Governor T’zan is correct,” Iroh inserted, trying to take control of the situation, “I summoned you all here to show you why we intend to engage the enemy near the Field of Coins, or rather, so Chieng could show you.”

At that moment Tien Shin arrived, his expression impassive. He saluted no one.

“Ready for “show and tell”, brother?”

“Why yes, Tien Shin,” Iroh replied, refusing to respond to the rancor offered, “We are.”

The elder prince turned to the blonde woman, anger etched on his face.

“Why am I refused access to the colony’s messenger hawks, Rhiannon?” he demanded without preamble.

“General Iroh so ordered it, your Highness.”

“I did, Tien Shin,” Iroh confirmed unapologetically, “There will be no messages sent home except mine.”

“My messages are personal, brother, not official. You’ve no right to deny me.”

“I have every right, Tien Shin, and my decision stands.”

Iroh stared his rival down, daring with him eyes to press the matter further. The elder prince glowered, but declined the implicit challenge. He then turned to Chieng, nodded once and motioned with his hand for her to begin.

“Proceed with the demonstration.”

Behind her the technicians had successfully extended telescoping metal legs into the ground beneath each engine and each of the cars in tow. These obviously acted as supports to hold them in place, but for what purpose remained unclear.

“There are several different types of tank trains,” the engineer began, “there are command models, like Corona and Constellation, there are personnel carriers, like Nova, and then there are the specials, like these two in front of us.”
“Specials? What’s special about them?” Nikon questioned in a slightly dubious tone. After a moment of observation he offered, “Well, I can see these only have one siphon instead of two.”

“Correct,” Chieng confirmed.

Iroh made a twirling gesture with an index finger, urging her to get on with it.

"This," Chieng said, motioning to each dreadnought in turn as if she were introducing two people, "is Inferno and that is Firestorm. What makes them different than the others? Observe."

She shouted a few orders at a technician wearing a white arm patch populated with obscure symbols. Moments later the rear section of the engine and several of the cars in tow opened at the top. They split open length wise into two equal halves. After a few seconds each half swung down on a hinge to land with a crash on the ground. Crews in each compartment had worked winches to open the cars. Now they cranked handles attached to gears that moved the firing platforms concealed within each car.

On top of each platform rested a large, complex mechanical scissor jack that supported a collection of tightly bound, long black metal tubes. As the audience watched the crews turned their cranks feverishly and the scissor jacks began to rise, lifting the tubes toward the sky. The platforms on which they rested also began to turn so that the ominous metal pipes soon aimed at a ninety degree angle to the length of the train.

“What the hell are those things?” Nikon blurted.

“Those,” Chieng answered proudly, “are rocket launchers.”

Gan snorted.

“Nooooo, those are gold launchers.”

“Oh, out with it, Gan,” the engineer commanded impatiently, “you won’t be happy until you do.”

“Oh, I will, Chieng, gladly!”

The accountant clearly relished the challenge and was delighted that he could finally unburden himself on a matter which had long since weighed on him in private.

“Each of those rockets costs eight thousand gold pieces! Eight thousand! Every time you fire a bank of these damn things it costs about four hundred thousand gold pieces!”

“Holy shit!” Nikon exclaimed.

“Yes!” Gan agreed, wholeheartedly approving of the profanity, finding it a completely appropriate expression in light of the obscene revelation, “Four banks on each train, two trains – that’s over three million gold pieces we blow on each launch!”

Rhiannon’s eyebrows disappeared under her bangs in surprise.

“That’s ridiculous,” the governor stated flatly, “that means those rockets are literally worth their weight in gold.”

“Yes,” the Qu’ai Tai rejoined, his words clipped, brutal and intense, “actually, based on the Fukuoka Metal Exchange’s third quarter average spot price, they are worth more than their weight in gold! The only thing worse is that we lost four of these rocket sleds at Lake Myojin – and they never even
“Why didn’t anyone say anything about these things before?” Nikon asked incredulously.

Iroh coughed in embarrassment, but it was Tien Shin who answered.

“Need to know only… daimyo,” he replied, using Nikon’s title for the first time with obvious scorn, “and you didn’t need to know.”

“Well,” Nikon stuttered, “why did Gan need to know?”

Gan made a sound of utter disgust.

Chieng smiled evilly, her eyes narrowing, and answered.

“Because the Qu’ai Tau has to sign off in writing before we can launch. I guess the Fire Lord cares about the money too.”

Nikon looked over at Iroh, who nodded.

“My cousin made him sign an undated order when were at Nanjing. He carried it with him to Lake Myojin.”

“Okay,” Nikon replied, obviously struggling, “so, now I finally understand what “Commander, Strategic Rocket Forces” meant, but I still don’t get the problem – if they are so stupidly expensive why do we have them? What do they do?”

Chieng snapped her fingers and two technicians who were loading one of the tubes rushed over with their load. They held between them a six foot metal cylinder with fluted ends and a blunt nose.

“Each of these tubes is a firing chamber for one of these, a Gong Feng artillery rocket. The back end is a simple solid fuel propulsion system, the front is a warhead. Some are packed with blasting powder and metal shrapnel, others with a pyrophoric metal compound that burns hotter than any fire known to us and can’t be extinguished with water. Aimed properly, using the correct azimuth and elevation calculations for indirect fire, you can strike a small area with devastating force.”

“So… what costs all the money?” Nikon asked non-plussed.

Tien Shin and Gan both snorted in almost identical fashion.

“The machining has to be precise,” Chieng replied, “Or the projectiles aren’t accurate, but the main expense is the shell alloy, the solid fuel and especially the thickening agent used to produce the pyrophoric metal compound.”

“Couldn’t you have found something less expensive? Like platinum?” Gan scolded.

Chieng ignored the remark and motioned for the technicians to return to their task.

“So, how many dirt slingers are we going to kill, Chieng?” Gan continued his prosecution, “I want to know.”

“Obviously I don’t know exactly,” she replied clinically, “but based on the War College staff’s latest estimates of the average density of the standard Earth Kingdom infantry formations, each sled should inflict a few thousand casualties with each launch.”

“What a deal!” the Qu’ai Tau responded slightly hysterically, “That’s more than a thousand gold per
kill. I mean, why don’t we just give the money to each earthbender who’ll agree to just go home? I bet they’d take five hundred a piece and we could pocket the rest!”

“Are you saying you won’t sign off on the use of these weapons?” Tien Shin broke in using his most calculating tone.

Gan hesitated.

“No,” he replied, regaining his composure, “I didn’t say that, your Highness.”

“That’s good,” Iroh injected, “Because we will need them to spring our trap.”

“Besides, Gan,” Chieng offered in reply to the accountant’s unanswered question, “these rockets were produced and paid for long ago. I believe you would refer to it as… a “sunk cost”?”

“Sunk is right, in more ways than one,” he confirmed acidly, “but yes, you are correct, the money’s already been spent.”

He turned to Iroh.

“Of course I’ll approve their use, General, but I’d like to know how we’re going to get our money’s worth… or,” he added shooting an accusatory glance at Chieng, “as much of it as we’re ever going to get.”

“Yes, I would too,” the governor challenged, folding her white arms across her chest, “What does all this have to do with the Field of Coins? Why do we insist on offering battle in the only place for a hundred leagues with exposed rock? Why don’t we use these weapons somewhere else, anywhere else on the steppes? Why do we insist on throwing away our advantage?”

“Still don’t see it, Rhiannon?” Tien Shin asked somewhat incredulously, for despite her rejection of him he held a high opinion of her intelligence, “Think about it. We need to maneuver the enemy, or rather as much of the enemy as we can safely handle at once, into exposing himself to this artillery in a tight, densely packed formation.”

“And the best way to do that,” Iroh continued seamlessly, “is to lure them with the promise of easy victory. Fortunately, Governor, you have offered us an excellent opportunity to do just this. How? Well, why not allow them to chase a weak Fire Nation unit near enough to this Field of Coins for them to imagine trapping and destroying them in it?”

Gan squinted, quickly assessing the plan in his mind.

“Okay, which part of Nifong’s army are we going to target? And how are we going to isolate it?”

“Excellent question, Gan,” Tien Shin comment with a sardonic, but approving smile.

“I don’t recommend the cavalry vanguard, General,” Nikon offered, “We should let them pass and go for the heavy infantry coming up behind.”

“I agree,” the elder prince agreed to everyone’s surprise, “the heavy infantry is most likely to employ “the square” or one of the other tight formations.”

“Who will be the bait?” the governor asked suddenly, clearly uncomfortable.

The group fell silent, for everyone suspected the unpleasant answer.

“If Iroh has any guts at all,” Tien Shin finally supplied with a glint in his sharp brown eyes, “the
garrison of Mequon of course. They are supposed to be here. We are not. Sighting a group of colonial soldiers will provoke no special alarm.”

Rhiannon looked at Iroh, her face pale, her expression taut.

“General?” she finally prompted.

“Yes, Lord Governor,” the Crown Prince confirmed, his expression sad, “our greatest advantage is that Nifong does not know we are here.”

“You will sacrifice my people to preserve this advantage, then?” she challenged, her voice cold.

“I will sacrifice no one,” Iroh vowed, “but every Fire Nation soldier will risk their lives many times over before we are through with the Army of the Granite Mountains.”

The silence returned and quickly became awkward.

“I don’t like this plan,” Rhiannon finally concluded, “but I understand why you propose it. Will any of my people survive, do you think?”

“They should, your Excellency,” Nikon speculated, trying earnestly to give hope to the strange and exotic colonial ruler, “Really all they’ll need to do is retreat, if they get overrun then they will be in big trouble, but if we play our cards right the majority should escape.”

“No promises, Governor,” Iroh stressed, clearly striking a less encouraging tone than his friend, “Like I said, we are all at risk here.”

“I understand,” she replied, clearly unhappy.

“Okay,” Gan injected, “I get it, I think. So this is why the length of the enemy column is of such interest, right?”

“Exactly,” Iroh confirmed, “They’ve spread themselves out. This is a great boon. It will help us to isolate whatever piece of Nifong’s army we choose to destroy first.”

Gan nodded his head once in acceptance.

“All right, I’ll sign the order as soon as we get back to the Constellation.”

Iroh smiled slightly and shifted his eyes to the raven haired engineer. She turned and motioned one of the senior technicians to come over to the group.

“Don’t bother with the permission slip, Gan,” Chieng directed bluntly as her technician joined them, “You’re going to have your finger on the launch button yourself.”

“What?”

“Captain Fujiyama died in the desert.”

“So?”

“You must take command of the Inferno.”

Gan blinked.

“No, I don’t.”
They all regarded their bookish friend with compassion. Only Tien Shin remained impassive.

“Yes, my friend,” Iroh corrected gently, “You must.”

“I’m an accountant, not a warrior,” he refused flatly, “I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“That’s not what I saw at Nomura, or half a dozen times since then.”

The Qu’ai Tau eyed each in turn, finally coming to rest on the engineer. He was too perceptive not to recognize the author of his misfortune.

“Why?”

“You can think, learn, and make decisions under intense pressure,” she replied without hesitation, “You can do calculations in your head almost as well as I can. This is all that is required to make a good captain, and the Inferno needs a good captain. I need you to do this.”

“No, you don’t,” he contradicted firmly, ignoring the implicit insult, “Why not do it yourself?”

“I command the fleet,” she replied, “I must pay attention to the whole battle. Besides, then Corona would be without a captain.”

“This is ridiculous, promote someone else. You have hundreds of technicians who actually have experience.”

“Gan,” she replied with a tone of finality, “I want you to do this. I trust you. There is no time now for argument.”

He looked over at Iroh, and then to Rhiannon. He found sympathy, but no help.

Nikon put a supportive hand on Gan’s shoulder.

“I know just how you feel.”

“Gan, this your Chief Boiler Operator,” Chieng continued, indicating the thin, curly haired woman in maroon coveralls who had just joined them, “Chief Tang, this is your new captain.”

“Greetings, Captain!”

Gan did not respond, clearly still in shock.

“Chief, I expect Captain Shu to be trained in all dreadnought mainline operating procedures within forty eight hours. I ask nothing less than that you teach him everything you know and obey his commands as you would the word of Agni.”

“Of course, Commander! I look forward to it!” the technician responded enthusiastically.

She turned back to Gan.

“The Inferno is yours, Captain.”

The accountant stood there, dumfounded. Finally he choked out a response.

“I don’t believe this is happening. This is a mistake.”

“Don’t worry, Captain! We have the best crew in the fleet, and we’ll show you everything!” Chief
Tang beamed with confidence and pride, “Besides, you should be happy. You don’t have to worry about that silly bean counting stuff anymore. You’ve been promoted!”
Lady and the Tramp

Chapter Summary

Nikon and Rhiannon have a chance encounter before the battle of Mequon begins.

The night was pitch black, the moon had not yet risen. Nikon walked the ramparts of Mequon’s inner keep sunk in a brooding silence. He was exhausted and should have been asleep, but he knew better than to even try. The staging of supplies and loading of the tank trains had not been completed by nightfall, so Iroh had decided to delay the army’s departure until the following morning. Nikon had spent the day and early evening supervising the refueling of the armor and planning the last details of the battle plan based on the latest scouting reports. Now, with all the decisions made, he had only to endure the stubborn, lonely hours before daybreak.

Every hundred feet a guard of the watch stood at attention between a pair of huge fire pots. Their flames leapt to the sky, making shadows dance on the crenellations of the battlement. Each of the guards saluted smartly as the daimyo passed, their faces concealed by their hideous skull masks.

Nikon gathered his cloak about him. The steppe was hot during the day, but cooled off rapidly at night. Like the desert, there was little on the grassy plain to retain heat. Below he could hear the gentle sounds of the Yangtze as its wide, sluggish expanse skirted the northeastern edge of the fortress. These dwindled as the parapet turned north with the curtain wall.

The upcoming battle had occupied his every thought, but now his mind drifted across the dizzying events of the past weeks and months. War on the Nasu. Lake Myojin. Xian’s death. The continued threat of Tien Shin. The promotion. The desert. The dam. The rockets. The mysterious and exotic seer who somehow stood astride their fates. Each swirled in his consciousness like episodes from one of the wretched pulp fiction serials sold by the cart load in the night markets of the capital.

None of it seemed real. Cycling the events over and over in his head, it seemed as if they had happened to someone else entirely. He’d grown up nameless and homeless in the gutters of the greatest city in the world. Now he was the best friend of the Crown Prince and the direct superior of another, the latter perhaps the most hated and feared creature in the Empire. He could barely add and subtract, but he was all too aware that the probabilities against such a life as he had lead were overwhelming.

Yet it was all too real. Nifong was real. He had witnessed the enemy’s might at Lake Myojin and seen with his own eyes the broken bodies of his comrades.

“Will it be any different this time?” He wondered in quiet desperation, “Have we suffered all this for nothing?”

Alien and uncomfortable feelings of loneliness and doubt gnawed at him.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

Nikon was jarred out of his melancholy by one of the very objects of his reverie.

The governor of Mequon stood before him, having approached from the opposite direction. She
wore a white gown with many deep folds and a long train thrown over her left shoulder. The broad crimson border held in common with her formal kimono scored a deep purple in the darkness.

She smiled.

“I’m sorry. I startled you.”

No one should have been able to approach him without detection. Had she been an assassin he would surely have been dead.

“Oh! Well, uh, I guess so.”

He felt like an utter fool. He resisted the urge to look her up and down. Perhaps he had met an assassin after all.

The governor’s smile widened.

“Normally I shouldn’t inquire, daimyo Orlando, but shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“Yes, Governor T’Zan,” he admitted with a rueful nod of his head, “I should.”

She nodded acceptance of the admission. There was no need to ask why.

“Do you often walk your battlements at midnight, your Excellency?” he inquired politely, trying to recover his balance.

“Every night. In times of trouble it gives my people comfort to know their leader sees personally to the defense of the city.”

She was remarkable.

“Is Iroh asleep?” she wondered.

Nikon blew out a large breath, unaware he had been holding it, and responded, “Yes, thank Agni, he needs it. He nodded off at the end of my briefing an hour or so ago.”

She studied him thoughtfully. He held her gaze, knowing that she was assessing him.

“You have become a great friend to him.”

It was a statement. Such was her certainty he felt no need to respond.

“I’m glad he has such a friend,” she continued in earnest, “Like Xian… he is a good man trapped in an unforgiving world.”

“The world is cruel, your Excellency, but Prince Iroh has learned to handle it well,” he responded with pride, “May Lord Azulon live forever, but Iroh will be a magnificent Fire Lord,” then, exhaustion lowering his inhibitions blurted forth, “I know you’re like a sister to him – and to Gan.”

She smiled again.

“I suppose so, I would have been blessed indeed to have brothers like them.”

“Gan probably won’t be talking to any of us after what we did to him this morning though, if we all live through this mess anyway.”
“No,” she replied with a chuckle, “but I don’t begrudge Commander Shiung’s choice, it is sound. Besides, he’s safer on the Inferno than he would be anywhere except the city and for all his bookishness I know he could never abide that while you and Iroh face danger.”

An uneasy silence descended. He had questions, so many, but they died on his lips. Iroh had sworn him to secrecy.

She saw right through him.

“You have questions.”

“Many,” he confirmed.

“Ask them.”

He hesitated, unable to force himself to voice his fears and to risk betraying the confidence of his friend.

She saved him the torment.

“Iroh trusts you.”

“Yes.”

“As he trusts me.”

The implication was clear, but still unspoken.

“Please,” he implored, breaking eye contact, “Lord Governor, I only want…”

“Nikon.”

He looked back at her, her face now illuminated on one side by the nearest fire pot and on the other by the waxing moon that had risen in the few minutes since her appearance.

“My given name is Rhiannon. Iroh and Gan have free use of it. I give it you as well.”

Nikon actually welled up, an extremely rare and uncomfortable experience. He bowed deeply.

“You are everything Iroh said, Rhiannon.”

She laughed, a silvery sound that filled him with joy in a way that no other sound ever had.

“Well, that could cut many ways! Still, I take it as the compliment I hope you intend.”

He looked at her once again. Her smile faded.

“Ask.”

He couldn’t help it. The ridiculous, stupid question came out before he could even think to stop it.

“Are you married?”

She looked at him, momentarily stunned at the unexpected question.

Suddenly she burst out laughing, covering her mouth in an unconscious court gesture of modesty.
“No,” she replied after she had regained her composure, “No, I’m not.”

“I’m sorry,” he fumbled, “That was stupid, I uh…”

What the hell was going on? He’d never been this clueless around a woman. Ever. It wasn’t her rank or her golden locks either. He had no idea what it was.

Her laughter died down to a chuckle. She cocked her head in a good natured way.

“You are sweet, despite your reputation, but I don’t advise courting me, Nikon, and I think you know why.”

Nikon dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“I know, I’m sorry,” recovering some of his boldness he took her hand in his, “I didn’t mean to be such an ass. Iroh told me how you loved Xian.”

Her smile faded and she looked down at the parapet, but did not release Nikon’s grip.

“Please believe me,” he continued, “for the short time I knew him, Xian was my hero, who stood in the place of my own excellent father. I would die rather than let the same thing happen to Iroh.”

She squeezed his hand once and released it. She looked back up at him, her expression taut.

“I believe you.”

The wind whipped the fire in the pots. It rustled his cloak and the purpled edges of her gown.

He pursed his lips, then ventured forth.

“Will we lose?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you… seen anything then?”

So there it was. She knew without asking Iroh had confided in this man. She did not question it, for she believed in the Crown Prince.

“So, he did tell you.”

She drew herself up, and though she was shorter than he, she seemed to tower over him.

“Commoner you were born, Nikon Orlando,” she thundered, “but you have been called to a higher destiny! Swear to me on your friendship with the son of Azulon that you will keep this secret!”

Suddenly he was afraid of the imperious woman before him who regarded him with cold and penetrating eyes.

He swallowed once and nodded his assent.

“I swear, Rhiannon.”

Her intensity ebbed, her countenance slowly falling vacant.

“It is well then, Nikon… for what Iroh told you is true… now and then I see the crystal visions,” she replied, “I keep my visions to myself… dreams of loneliness, despair and heartbreak. Would you
“really see these things with me?”

He steeled himself and pressed on.

“I would.”

“You are brave then.”

“I am a fool,” he offered with complete sincerity.

“Aren’t we all?” she countered.

He took a breath.

“Did you… did you see what happened at Lake Myojin? What… happened to Xian?”

Her eyes widened. She had expected questions about the future. Instead he asked her the very question she had intended to ask him in trade about the past.

“No…,” she replied, “did you?”

“Didn’t Iroh tell you?”

She shook her head.

“All he told me was Xian died in battle, but he wasn’t there. You were.”

“I was,” Nikon confirmed bitterly.

She lurched forward, intense once again, “Tell me what happened, Nikon, please. How… how did he die?”

He had expected to hear prophecies of doom, now he found himself launching once again into the tragedy of the Little Round Top and the destruction of the leviathans. He had to hold back tears once again as he related the dying prince’s final agonies.

“I’m so sorry,” Nikon concluded miserably, “We… I… should have saved him somehow…”

The governor looked past the young commoner into the night. Wordlessly she put a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

“You try to comfort me, Rhiannon,” the daimyo commented with a mixture of incredulity and bitterness, “but it is you who should be comforted. I can only imagine how you must feel.”

“There is no comfort for me, none at all,” she replied gently, “do not hold yourself to account for the impossible. I am not the only one who grieves.”

After a few moments she turned to face him once more.

“Why did you ask me that? Why the past instead of the future?”

This time it was he who looked away, unconsciously biting his lip. He’d been caught fishing and hadn’t thought ahead how to answer the charge.

Her quick mind, almost unique in her ability to operate through stress and anguish, analyzed Nikon’s account.
“What was Xian doing out there, Nikon? He was needed on the line,” she asked as Iroh had weeks before, then with sudden intensity, “And where was Tien Shin?”

Nikon met her gaze.

“Iroh asked the same thing, but we never pursued it.”

The suspicion hung between them.

“What we didn’t know when Iroh asked the question originally was that Tien Shin did survive… using Xian’s tank train.”

Bitter tears sparkled in the alternating harsh orange light of the fire pots and the soft pallor of the moon.

“He got him alone, then…” she whispered, “You know that, right?”

Nikon looked at the ground and nodded.

“Chieng was certain the moment he showed up in the Comet, but we haven’t brought this to Iroh. There’s no evidence and no motive as far as we can tell. There’s no way in that situation Tien Shin could have expected to survive. Why kill your commanding officer in the middle of a hopeless battle? Don’t mistake me – I don’t put it past him at all! I think he did it, in fact I’m damn sure he did it! I just don’t know how or why. Anyway, Iroh has enough on his mind without us bringing hugely explosive allegations like this to him.”

She wiped the silent tears away as they came.

“He’d believe you, evidence or motive withstanding, and that’s the real problem,” she responded, “Iroh would kill Tien Shin without compunction if he thought for a moment he was responsible for Xian’s death.”

Nikon twisted away to look out over the parapet, his countenance becoming wild.

“But would that be the worst thing?” he suddenly roared in frustration, “We’re at war, he’s the commanding general, you’re the lawfully appointed governor, who cares if Tien Shin accepts agni kai or not? Maybe we should just kill him!”

The governor eyed him for a moment before responding.

“I pushed for the same thing yesterday,” she revealed finally, “but Iroh argued against it. He’s probably right. As much as we hate it, defeating Nifong is more important than getting rid of Tien Shin.”

Nikon, rapidly cooling in the face of the governor’s controlled demeanor, grunted in unhappy agreement.

“Iroh said we needed him to win,” she continued skeptically, “but is it true? Do we need actually need my horrid fiancé for this battle?”

Another ugly question. There seemed to be no shortage of them.

Nikon sighed. He felt old.

“Yes, yes, we do, or let’s say our chances, whatever they may be, are better with him than without him.”
Rhiannon smiled gently.

“Now it is my turn to be sorry, that was rough of me. I know that must have hurt to admit.”

Nikon laughed.

“You have no idea… or,“ he reconsidered, “well, yes, I guess you do.”

Then he caught it.

“Wait… fiancé?”

Her countenance went cold.

“Yes. Didn’t Iroh tell you that either?”

“Uh... no.”

Suddenly he understood Tien Shin’s veiled threat in her audience chamber the day before. The thought of this beautiful creature shackled against her will to the monster they both suspected of Xian’s murder was almost too much to bear.

“No!” he cried again, his voice rising, “No way!”

Without even thinking his hands turned to fists wreathed in blue fire. Expertly and without hesitation she grabbed his flaming limbs, brought them together and doused them with the palms of her hands.

“Talented, I see,” she observed with approval, “but this isn’t the time for a display.”

He calmed instantly. He’d never seen such a move before.

“Wow! How’d you do that?”

She dropped his hands.

“Years of practice.”

She regarded him evenly.

“Im sorry, I, just can’t imagine you with…” he trailed off mid sentence.

“Neither can I,” she agreed bitterly.

“But… but… how?”

“Fire Lady Ila contrived to have me betrothed to her little monster six months before my father was nominated by the War College for the governorship. I begged the Fire Lord for leave to accompany my father since he was already quite old and the appointment was only for two years. He agreed, thank Agni. Lady Ila was furious, but Lord Azulon had already approved my request in public and his decision published in the palace register.”

“I don’t get it, why weren’t you betrothed to Xian if you wanted to be with each other?”

He was asking ridiculously personal questions. He couldn’t stop himself.

She looked at him sadly.
“Oh, you are sweet, aren’t you? Imperial politics means never getting to choose your mate. Hasn’t Iroh told you anything? What exactly do you two talk about?”

He felt slightly ashamed of his ignorance, though he knew she wasn’t judging him for it. She sighed and continued.

“Xian was betrothed when he was eighteen to Tien Shin’s younger sister. It broke my heart. It hurt so much, sometimes I didn’t know if I would survive. She died of a fever while he was on campaign in the southern Earth Kingdom, but by then… I was already promised to that… that thing.”

“I’m sorry,” Nikon mumbled, unsure what else to say.

“I am too, for all of us.”

“How did you end up staying… oh.”

Nikon’s voice trailed off. He remembered Iroh and Gan’s first mention of their childhood friend the night after he and Chieng had returned from the dreadful retreat over the Ping Tou.

“Why did I end up staying here?” she prompted, “I’m sure Iroh told you that. The war continued to go badly, and father was an excellent governor who inspired confidence in our allies. He reappointed father to another term.”

She laughed once more, this time heavily colored with melancholy.

“I helped father as best I could. He knew how I felt about Tien Shin, but he had been powerless to refuse Lady Ila. I buried myself in work to try to forget the horror that awaited me. Father made me his legate in his second term. Then he was murdered, as I’m sure you know, and the Fire Lord bade me take his place. I was shocked when I received the promotion. I expected to be ordered home.”

Nikon considered this for a moment.

“If Tien Shin gets back… he’ll carry out his threats, won’t he? All of them.”

“Oh yes,” she confirmed, her voice frigid.

“What will you do?”

She paused, refusing now to meet his gaze.

“I don’t know.”

He suspected this was a lie, but wisely declined to press any further.

“Well, hey, we don’t even know if he survives the battle, right?”

“No, we don’t… but I can tell you that Iroh will survive.”

Nikon stopped short, then exhaled a large breath.

“Thank, Agni! So you did see something! What, what did you see?”

She hesitated, clearly editing her response.

“I saw him… in the Fire Lord’s palace.”
“That’s great! Oh, man, I feel much better,” then suddenly confused, “but I don’t get it, doesn’t that mean we’ll win? Why didn’t you say that earlier?”

She shook her head once again.

“No, it wasn’t clear whether he was victorious or not. I also saw where the battle takes place, in the Field of Coins, but you already know this now. All I can tell you is that the battle, or part of it at least, takes place where you have planned it. As to the outcome… that I did not see.”

“Well, at least it’s something… though I wish you’d seen a rock drop on Tien Shin.”

She snorted.

“Didn’t Iroh tell you I never see anything good?”

The regarded each other in silence for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“Anything else you can tell me before we do this thing?” he asked after they recovered.

“Stay alive.”

“I meant anything useful?”

“Staying alive is useful.”

He could see she meant it.

“Okay, I guess I agree with that.”

This time an easy silence settled over them. The moon sped in its arc across the sky.

“Well, I guess better try to get a few hours of sleep,” he said finally, reluctant to leave her presence, but knowing it was time, “I bet it’ll be the last I get for a while.”

Rhiannon stepped forward and hugged him. Surprised and embarrassed, he felt a warm rush at her unexpected embrace. After a moment’s hesitation he hugged her back.

She released him and without a word resumed her walk down the parapet from where he had come.

A thought struck him as she disappeared from view and he found himself calling out to her.

“Hey, hey wait a minute! What reputation!?”

The echoes of her silver laughter were his only reply.
The Razor’s Edge

Chapter Summary

Iroh says goodbye to his friends before the Battle of Mequon begins.

The Army of the Great Divide poured through the east gate of Mequon without fanfare. Outside they gained the straight, flat surface of the Silk Road that stretched endlessly north and east to the horizon.

The sound of marching feet filled the air, but there was no conversation, laughing or singing amongst the soldiers of the Fire Nation. A short period of rest and fresh food had restored their bodies, but their spirits flagged. They had survived the Dune Sea as their new general had promised, but the cost had been high. Now they marched to face the greatest Earth Kingdom general since Ch’in the Conqueror, the man who had dispatched the most technologically superior army in the world with startling ease.

Corona and Constellation were parked near the gate, but the armor and the other dreadnoughts had left hours ago. Imitating the custom observed on the leviathans, names suddenly sprang up in thick scrawls of red paint, like spatters of blood, on the turret of every machine. “Xian’s Revenge” led the procession, followed by “Little Dragon”, “Rock Crusher” and “Firefly.” Nikon, reunited with his erstwhile tank driver, Sergeant Jin, drove the machine christened “Nikon’s Fury.” All of them bore the number “five” in gold on their bodies to mark them as part of the daimyo’s vaunted Fifth Brigade.

First of all to depart had been the majority of the garrison of Mequon the day before. Requiring the greatest speed, for they had to swing south of the Earth Kingdom vanguard in order to be in position at the right time, they had been afforded all the mongoose dragons available. Now all that remained were barely enough to man the gates of the city.

Chieng and Iroh stood in silence as they watched the army move. The engineer had spent the last day getting the other tank trains underway and stripping the city of every piece of artillery that could be transported.

“Will Gan be prepared?” the young general asked after an eternity.

“Yes.”

“How many total artillery pieces recovered?”

“Nineteen.”

“Will you be able to catch up to them once you’ve got the artillery in tow?”

“Yes.”

Chieng was often laconic, but Iroh could tell something was wrong.

“Are you afraid?”

The question caught the engineer by surprise.
“What? No, I mean, yes, but…”

“Then what’s the matter?” he pressed.

The sharpness of Iroh’s question brought her clarity.

“Why did you put Tien Shin in charge of Second Corps?” she suddenly demanded in anger, “That’s half the army! Are you blind?”

Iroh sighed. Gan and Nikon had asked the same thing before they had left. He offered her the same answer he had given them. He knew she would have the same reaction.

“More than half actually, but, no, I’m not. I put him in command because he can lead men effectively in combat. We will need him to win. You and Gan must command the tank trains, Nikon commands the armor, and Tien Shin and I command the infantry. Everyone must play their part.”

“You are helping him to kill you,” she accused with barely restrained emotion through gritted teeth, her golden eyes hard and intense.

“A risk I will have to take, Chieng, and not much of one unless we win.”

The engineer folded her arms in what Iroh now recognized as her trademark gesture of self-protection.

“The moment we eliminate the threat of the enemy he will become one.”

The young general sighed again, but made no reply. He knew she was right, but there was little he could do. Decisions had to be made with little or no information, loaded with risk and danger at every turn. He recognized that Chieng said these things out of concern for him, but he doubted she realized their effect. He felt so alone. Is this how Xian had felt? He felt certain this was the case.

The curt engineer spared him any further discomfort by changing the subject. She knew Iroh would not change his mind, and it was probably too late to do so anyway.

“My mother was right at least about the need for the army to rest. It was a wise decision to delay. We would have no hope of defeating the enemy hungry and exhausted.”

“Ah, your mother,” Iroh began, grateful for the segue to a question he’d wanted to ask since he recovered in the desert, “You know I didn’t even know Lady Shiung was with us until I woke up in… uh… Or I mean, I saw her at the General Staff meetings, but I had no idea who she was. I was terribly embarrassed when I found out. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t ask,” she replied in obvious confusion, “Not that you’d have had any reason to, and… I didn’t think it was important, or at least, important for you to know. General Xian knew, of course, he requested her as he requested me.”

Iroh frowned slightly, unhappy with this response, but unable to place his finger on exactly why.

“She took excellent care of me,” he continued after a moment, “and I know many others as well. I’m glad she’s here.”

“She’s the best physician we have,” Chieng agreed, but offered no other comment.

Once again he found himself wanting to continue the conversation, but uncertain how. He certainly wasn’t going to bring up using her bed.
They slipped back into silence, more comfortable than the one before. He knew they would have to say goodbye again, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He scanned her surreptitiously from the side, but she simply stared with an inscrutable expression at the column of soldiers marching before them. For a moment he wondered if perhaps she too was procrastinating, for at this point there was nothing to delay her departure. This thought pleased him, a feeling which he did not care to examine too closely.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Rhiannon approaching.

“Come to see us off, Governor?” he asked with a smile.

She smiled in return, but her fair skin was taut with strain.

“Yes, General, and to offer my prayers for the Spirit of the Sun to protect you.”

Chieng regarded the governor coldly.

“You would do better to pray for victory, Lord Governor.”

“I do, Commander,” she replied without taking her eyes off Iroh, “but I pray for the safety of my friends just the same.”

The engineer’s eyes shifted quickly back and forth between Iroh and the Rhiannon.

“I had best get moving, General,” the engineer concluded abruptly.

Iroh turned to Chieng with a start. He suddenly realized he had intended their goodbye to be private. For the first time since arriving at Mequon he found himself regretting the governor’s presence.

“Of course, but are you sure you won’t take the Constellation as well? I’d feel better if you had…”

“No, General, you will need her for supply chain purposes at least.”

“But—”

“No, Iroh,” she replied, cutting him off, “I won’t have it. I will not leave you unprotected.”

She crossed her arms across her chest for emphasis. Rhiannon arched an eyebrow at her use of the general’s given name, but offered no other comment.

“All right,” he relented, “but I’m hardly unprotected with thousands of the best soldiers in the Fire Nation around me… and besides,” he added with a twinkle in his eye, “I’m not such a bad fighter myself!”

“Yes, I know.”

She saluted.

“Don’t die on me,” she commanded.

The engineer turned and left, unable, as was Iroh, to say goodbye. Moments later the mighty engines of Corona roared to life. The column of infantry parted to allow the leviathan passage.

The governor eyed her friend with a slight smile.

“She likes you, you know.”
“What?”

“She likes you, though she has a funny way of showing it.”

“Well, uh, sure…” he agreed, suddenly nervous, “She’s come to like all of us whether she admits it or not… I mean we’ve been through a lot together, so I suppose it’s only natural…”

“No, Iroh, not like that, I mean the other way.”

He hesitated only a moment before launching into a denial.

“Don’t be ridiculous! She was just playing off the order I gave her before… before…,” he stopped himself mid-sentence, the protest dying on his lips, “Uh, do you really think so?” his voice betraying hope he could not suppress, “How can you tell?”

“I’m a woman,” she said with a deliberately mysterious smile, “I know these things.”

“Well…”

The governor laughed, a silvery sound that Iroh associated with his childhood.

“Have you ever even been with a woman, Iroh?”

The Crown Prince sputtered, completely unprepared for such a blunt question, though it was entirely in character for his surrogate elder sister.

“Great Agni, Rhiannon, what kind of question is that!?”

“I thought as much,” she replied with satisfaction, “Too bad you don’t have time right now.”

“Time?” he said stupidly, as if he’d never heard the word before, “Time for what?”

“Oh, you’re clueless. Typical.”

She shook her head and exhaled a deep breath, steeling herself to say farewell. She stepped forward and hugged him, placing a hand on the back of his head.

“I love you, Iroh,” she vowed, her voice suddenly thick, “You and Gan have to live, please, I can’t lose you too.”

“I love you too, Rae,” he said, using the childhood nickname he had last used when he and Xian had said goodbye to her on the docks of the capital so many years before, “and I’m not going to die… the vision, remember?”

“But what’s worse?” she quailed, “Death or slavery? Imprisonment or exile?”

“I don’t know, but I think I’m about to find out.”

She hugged him close and then released him.

“You have to find a way out of this, Iroh! You have to destroy the Army of the Granite Mountains and somehow avoid this awful fate. Besides,” she said, stabbing a finger into his shoulder for emphasis, “if you let yourself get arrested or killed, you’ll be handing me over to Tien Shin! You’re not going to let Tien Shin have me, are you?”

“Absolutely not!” he replied instantly, then added with a gallant smile, “I’ll marry you myself if I
They both looked at each other for a few moments then burst out laughing. The idea was ridiculous. As Rhiannon had observed, imperial politics meant neither could choose whom they would marry.

“And how do you think Chieng would like that?” the governor asked quizzically, then continuing in a conspiratorial tone, “Besides, I think your daimyo would be happy to relieve you of the obligation.”

“Oh?” the young general prompted, his expression turning instantly suspicious, “what’d he do this time?”

Rhiannon chuckled. Obviously Iroh was used to his friend’s amorous adventures.

“If he made a pass at you I swear I’ll kill him!” Iroh vowed, exhibiting a mixture of anger and embarrassment that his friend might have committed such an impropriety.

The blonde woman broke into full throated laughter at this.

“No, no, nothing like that.”

Quickly the governor related her pernoctation with Nikon in the early morning hours. She chose to elide their speculation around Xian’s death, instead focusing on the more humorous aspects of their encounter.

"He’s sweet," she concluded, then added in an exaggerated tone of generosity, "You may keep him."

Iroh bowed. He had been shocked many times by Nikon’s behavior with women, but never this way. Life was full of surprises.

“He really asked if you were… married?” Iroh repeated dumbly.

“Yes, is that so strange then?”

“Well, uh, no, I mean, yes, I mean… I told you about him and his… uh… favorite sport so to speak, but I’ve never once heard him ask whether a woman was married or not… I don’t think he ever cared one way or the other if you know what I mean.”

“Oh dear,” Rhiannon remarked, putting her hand over her mouth, “Sounds like your friend may really be in trouble!”

They burst out laughing once again, this time Iroh shaking his head at his best friend’s incipient predicament.

“Well, I can hardly blame him,” Iroh allowed, still chuckling, “You are wonderful, my dear.”

“I am!” she agreed with a mischevious smile.

After their laughter subsided her expression turned serious. It was time to go. She straightened, her posture instantly imbuing her with the formal, regal presence that served her so well in the execution of her office.

Iroh sensed the change and stood to attention himself, his countenance mirroring hers. They regarded each other in silence for a few moments before Rhiannon spoke.

“We stand on the razor’s edge, General, and now, I fear, events will move us swiftly to resolution
one way or the other. Go now and meet your destiny. Avenge the death of my beloved Xian and win glory everlasting for the Fire Nation!”

“I will, Lord Governor,” the Crown Prince replied evenly, adopting a similarly formal tone, “I have no choice. Besides… have you forgotten my own vision I had that day?”

She smiled.

“No, Iroh, I will never forget that day.”

The Crown Prince’s expression hardened.

“I will avenge Xian’s death and destroy the enemy, Governor T’Zan. If I am ever to conquer Ba-Sing-Se, I must.”

Iroh raised the red baton he had inherited from his cousin to his forehead in salute. The governor saluted in return.

Moments later the Constellation followed Corona through the east gate of Mequon. Rhiannon watched in silence, wringing her hands in worry.

The time had come for Fate to show its hand.
Chapter Summary

The battle of Mequon begins.

“Now, most noble guests,” the storyteller continued, for the time of reckoning had come, “Our story finally takes us to the lamented Battle of Mequon. The night has sped by, and by my hand I see that we have now begun the second hour of the new day. Bear with me but a little longer and we shall come to the end of our tale. Alas, now we must pay for the glory of Lake Myojin as I promised.”

“Yet, before we take this final plunge into darkness, let us step back and reflect for a moment on the day and age in which these events took place, so different from ours today.”

“It was the autumn of the seventeenth year of the reign of the Earth King Hua Min. At that time the great poet Ying Lao was finishing his greatest work, the Galidiad, in the quiet comfort of Ba Sing Se. Far to the south the Southern Water Tribe had recorded the warmest summer on record, banishing the practice of ice fishing completely until the following year... and on the steppes of Mequon, the Earth Kingdom witnessed the bloodiest four days in our recorded history.”

"Only a small part of the infamous battle took place before the gates of that mighty fortress, and though the fate of the colony and the fortunes of war for a generation were decided in those dreadful days, the greatest deeds and bloodiest fighting were seen many leagues distant, near the small market town of Vyazma. In and around this small patch of ground which had no honor in its possession save the name, the armies of the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom fought and poured out their life’s blood for their respective causes. Places with strange and unlikely names were destined by Fate to play a part in history. Now, we shall hear tell of the dreaded Field of Coins, The Crossroads, and Sad Hill.”

"Yes, my friends," the storyteller continued, his expression grieved, "before this tale is over, we shall see the Army of the Granite Mountains, exhausted, ragged, and spent, face utter destruction at the hands of General Iroh and his pitiless conquerors."

The old man swept the room once more and saw his monologue had achieved the desired effect. The audience’s mood had swung dramatically from elation at Lake Myojin, to wonder at the desert crossing, suspense at the exploration of the dam, and growing apprehension as the story drew inexorably to the slaughter at Mequon.

The chamber’s disposition was now somber. Guests who had fallen asleep after dessert had been woken by their companions. All eyes now looked to Gao with growing unease, the atmosphere steeped in a tense silence.

Iroh stole a glance at his immediate neighbors. Even Trimazu and Chen Ho, much to Iroh’s surprise, had ceased their bickering. The merchant idly fingered one of his rings, pushing its jeweled crown round and round his finger in a mute, telltale expression of disquiet. Chen Ho twirled his drooping mustache, his eyes flinty and cold. The ex-governor, his back erect, his hands folded neatly in his lap, could have been a statue. The other audience members exhibited similar signs of unease.

For the first time that night Iroh did not need to disguise his emotions. The audience’s feelings of sadness and anxiety mirrored his own. He looked over at his nephew, who, with arms folded in a gesture of self-protection, wore his trademark scowl. The retired general turned back to the bard.
“Now, my friends,” Gao continued after completing his survey, “I give you the Battle of Mequon.”

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Colonel Fong was in an excellent mood. After fording the Chaophraya his division had made rapid progress. The column spent a little more than a day negotiating the grassy, gently rolling hill country of the eastern steppes before they came upon a remarkably straight thoroughfare. Fong and his soldiers had cheered at the sight, for this road led to the gates of Mequon. This famous and mighty artery was none other than the Silk Road and it ran across the entire breadth of the Earth Kingdom. Far older than the Jade Highway or even the Omashu Highway, the Silk Road was a wide, raised edifice built to transport volumes of traffic that had long since vanished. Using this corridor Fong and his unit moved rapidly west with the other divisions of Colonel Jenju’s First Cavalry Corps in tow.

The country which they traversed was largely open, but they passed several market towns. All of these welcomed their liberators with cheers, music and gifts of food and flowers. Heaps of Fire Nation flags were burned, the flag of the Earth Kingdom was raised far and wide, and the fascist administrators and jailors who had administered the Fire Lord’s slave state had been ruthlessly executed, their lifeless bodies left to rot in every village square.

The weather continued to be fine, and the men of the Seventh Cavalry sang to the heavens in praise of the Earth Spirit and General Nifong. When Colonel Fong himself appeared, as he often did, they delighted in switching to bawdy verses making fun of their beloved young commander who laughed right along with them.

"Men of Ba Sing Se, keep close to your women, for here’s a bearded adulterer. Gold in Amiganza you spent in dalliance, which you borrowed here in Ningbo!"

After a few days they crossed an ancient stone bridge over the Donetz River almost as large as the ones wrecked by the flash flood they encountered at the Chaophraya. On the northern horizon the escarpment of the Dune Sea was once again visible as it had been on the Omashu Highway during their journey south.

Colonel Fong stroked his luxuriant beard, a smile on his lips, as he cantered his ostrich horse forward to the head of the column. He liked to ride point with the commander of the lead squadron as often as the situation permitted.

The young woman in command smiled and saluted as he joined her.

“Welcome, Colonel!”

“Greetings, Lieutenant! An excellent day to ride, don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir, we’re making good progress and there is still no sign of Fire Nation forces.”

“Oh, don’t worry about the enemy,” he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, “we won’t see any lobster backs until we get to Mequon!”

“That’s a shame, Colonel,” she replied with a mischievous grin, “We’re all getting bored.”

“Hah! A fine sentiment, Lieutenant! I too would like something interesting to happen.”

“Well, we can’t expect to fight a battle like Lake Myojin more than once in our lives, can we?”

Fong laughed in hearty agreement.

“Well, hope springs eternal!”
They rode in comfortable silence for some time before the Colonel spoke again.

“What was the name of the town we passed yesterday morning, Lieutenant?”

“Vyazma, sir.”

Fong’s countenance brightened.

“Good, we are making excellent progress then. We should make the outer wall of Mequon the day after tomorrow!” then, after a moment of thought equivocated, “Well, maybe the day after that anyway.”

A courier appeared from behind, slowing down rapidly from a dead gallop. The rider, caked with dust and dirt, saluted.

“Oh great Earth Spirit,” Fong swore with a small laugh, “another one?”

Why wouldn’t the old hen just leave him alone?

The courier handed him a scroll tube. Fong sighed and opened it. He recognized the seal.

“Is Colonel Jenju ordering us to slow down again?” the young woman asked with suppressed mirth.

“No, not this time,” he replied in a suddenly neutral tone.

The scroll was from General Nifong. He rolled it up and placed it back in the tube.

“Anything wrong, Colonel?”

“No, I just have to go see the General,” he replied with a confident smile, “Looks like we’ll have hold up here for awhile, Lieutenant, at least until I can figure out what’s going on.”

“Yes, sir,” she acknowledged, a confused expression on her face.

Fong kicked his ostrich horse into a gallop. He didn’t bother to tell her that he’d been relieved of command.


“Yes, Colonel,” the adjutant replied, “some of the men from the Second Division thought there might be shoes there.”

“And Colonel Cho permitted this?”

“Apparently she did, sir.”

Liu swore under his breath. Armies had been destroyed for stupider reasons.

“All right, what’s this place called again?”

“Vyazma.”

Liu bit his lip as he considered this new information.

“How far ahead of us is First Corps now?”
“Has to be two days at least, maybe three.”

“Damn him!” Liu thundered in impotent frustration, “Fong should have been fired the day after we crossed the Chaophraya! Jenju should be relieved too, dammit! She can’t control him and he can’t obey orders!”

“Yes, sir, but what do we do about the enemy now?”

Liu suppressed his anger ruthlessly. He knew it would not help. Biting his tongue, he forced himself to think.

“Are we in possession of the town?”

“Yes, sir, apparently we surprised each other. The fascists resisted briefly, but retreated southwest along the Silk Road.”

“Do we have a description from the scouts?”

The aide handed Liu a scroll. He unrolled it with a flick of his wrist.

“I see… colonials. Probably from the garrison at Mequon.”

“Yes, but they fought well, at least according to this report. Most of our soldiers weren’t benders, so it wasn’t an even match.”

Liu grunted. That made sense. Many earthbenders preferred to go barefoot. The pikemen and blade wielders would be the ones interested in shoes.

“We should go after them, right, sir? Looks like a couple thousand at most, but that’s got to be half the garrison. It’ll be a lot easier to take them down out here than if we let them hole back up in the city.”

The adjutant’s reasoning was sound, but Liu hesitated anyway. He was no fool.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. We’re strung out as it is.”

“Yes, sir, but I’m afraid Second Division is already in pursuit. Colonel Cho sent this.”

Another scroll changed hands. Liu’s eyebrows disappeared underneath his bangs in surprise.

“Coins? You’re kidding me.”

“That’s the word, sir, a huge field of them, apparently left over from Sozin’s invasion.”

“Yes… probably from the counterattack after our defeat at Hue… if I remember the history right.”

Liu stroked his beard thoughtfully. The opportunity was too good to pass up. He made his decision with a quick nod of his head.

“Right, let’s make short work of it then. We’ll use the scouts as light cavalry to put pressure on their left flank and push them into the coin field. I want orders dispatched to Fifth Division and Twelfth Cavalry and a message sent to Colonel Jenju. If she can get Fong’s outfit back under control she may be able to return in time to help.”

“Yes, sir, we can probably push them into the coins by early tomorrow morning. Do you plan a night attack?”
“No, Lieutenant. We’ll go for encirclement and attack at first light.”

It was late afternoon. The action at Vyazma had probably taken place two hours before. Liu squinted up at the sun and made some rough calculations in his head. He had done this many times over the years and knew his estimate would be accurate to within an hour.

“Colonel Cho can move Second Division against their left flank as the enemy retreats. We should be in position on their front by sunrise. Fifth Division can probably set up on their eastern flank by the third or fourth hour. Twelfth Cavalry might even get here before the Fifth if they pivot quickly enough.”

“If they march all night the Fifth will be pretty tired out, sir,” the aide pointed out, “is it really a good idea to expect them to attack without rest?”

“No, it isn’t, but we’ll do the heavy lifting along with Cho’s men. The Fifth and Twelfth Cavalry will just have to prevent escape. We’ll outnumber them six to one without them anyway…and besides,” the Colonel added with a wry grin, “we’ll have all the toys an earthbender could hope for, isn’t that right, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Colonel,” the aide replied with a matching grin, “Sounds like the enemy is going to have a tough time in the Field of Coins.”

“Let’s hope so. Meanwhile, we must inform the general of our situation.”

The waning moon hung low over the horizon when the green clad general received the message. His adjutant, who slept as little as his commanding officer, appeared before him as a dirty, mud spattered mess. After exchanging salutes the young captain handed Nifong the report from Colonel Liu.

“Did you read this, Captain?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you make of it?”

“It looks like a good opportunity to destroy the Mequon garrison. Unfortunately, Colonel Fong’s… intransigence…” the adjutant chose the word carefully, “has left us all spread out over almost a hundred leagues. So, I think we’re exposed.”

“You don’t sound as optimistic as you once did,” Nifong noted.

“You have taken great pains to teach the value of sobriety and humility, General, but… it looks like Colonel Liu was right about Colonel Fong…” the younger man hesitated, but ultimately pressed forward with his admission, “I feel a bit of a fool for encouraging him about reaching Mequon first and all that.”

“If you feel a fool then how should I feel, Captain, when I trusted him with the power to expose us so foolishly?”

Nifong could not prevent some bitterness from showing in his voice. The aide knew his superior’s self-criticism was justified, but he could not bring himself to voice agreement. Besides, the question was clearly rhetorical. Receiving no reply, he followed up with a more prosaic inquiry.

“Have we received any reports from the southbound scouts?”
“Nothing yet, sir.”

This was not troubling in and of itself, but the grizzled general suspected it nonetheless.

“Well,” the younger man offered, “since it looks like it’s just some garrison troops, Colonel Liu should have no trouble, right?”

“If the situation is what it seems, then no, he should have no trouble at all.”

“Right, in fact, it’s almost a shame there isn’t more of them – what more favorable ground could we ask for than a field full of huge stone disks? That’s a nice stroke of luck.”

“Remember the old adage, Captain,” the green clad general warned, “be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.”

The younger man considered this for moment.

“No matter,” Nifong continued, straightening his uniform, “We must break camp immediately and conduct a forced march to support Colonel Liu.”

The adjutant looked at his superior in surprise, for the men had only camped a few hours prior and few had gained any rest since they had stopped.

“Why, sir? It’s just a small band of colonials.”

“Probably, but we need to tighten up the column no matter what, and if this is what we believe it is then we will stop to rest after the garrison is eliminated.”

“… and… if it isn’t?”

“Then we will be in position to support our comrades when they need us most. If we march tonight we should reach their position in no more than a day.”

Nifong and his aide left to rouse the soldiers camped around them to action.
The Prisoner

Chapter Summary

Iroh is defeated in the second encounter of the battle, but receives help from a most unlikely source...

Iroh ran blindly through the darkness, the gallop of ostrich horses and the impact of falling boulders growing loud in his ears. He gasped for air, his lungs burning after running for so long in full armor and almost stumbled over the body of a comrade felled moments before by a hail of green shafted arrows.

The outer wall of the city reared up before him. The gate and its watch towers remained unscathed, but huge sections of the wall on either side had been blasted to pieces. The ground was littered with the smashed and twisted remains of the metal fortifications.

As he reached the wall Azulon’s son dropped and rolled underneath a shattered piece of the superstructure. Around him hundreds of Fire Nation soldiers did the same. The field behind them was littered with red swathed bodies, some dying, many dead. The Earth Kingdom cavalry had dismounted when they sighted the fortress walls. Using square formations they marched slowly across the gently rolling steppe that dominated the region.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

Earlier that day the Crown Prince, following the plan, had moved the Fire Nation First Corps out of the eastern gates of Mequon. The lookouts had reported that the vanguard of the enemy was now less than ten leagues east of the city. Iroh’s job was as simple as it was vital. He now had to attract the attention of the enemy’s lead forces and prevent them from coming to the aid of the Earth Kingdom Second Corps, which was even then drawing nigh to Vyazma and the Field of Coins some thirty leagues farther north and east along the Silk Road.

Scout reports continued to show that the enemy column was spread out. The problem was even worsening as the days had passed. The main body of the Army of the Granite Mountains was by most accounts around ninety leagues east of its Jenju’s First Corps. While Iroh was satisfied with this circumstance, it did little more, he knew, than give the Army of the Great Divide a sporting chance against a far larger and better supplied opponent.

Deciding not to show his full strength at the outset, Iroh had brought forth one division within eyesight of the enemy as it approached. Rhiannon’s admonishment had weighed heavily on the young general, so he had left the Constellation just outside of the city’s outer walls and resolved himself to lead the formation that was used as bait.

The Earth Kingdom vanguard had risen to the challenge more enthusiastically than planned. The moment Iroh’s soldiers had displayed their colors the lead division of the enemy’s forces, by all accounts Colonel Fong’s vaunted Seventh Cavalry, had charged instantly instead of attempting to reconnoiter. A pitched battle erupted in which Iroh’s forces had experienced significant losses. Driven back in disarray, they had attempted several times to form a firing line, but the line had never survived the impact of the succeeding charge. The retreat had rapidly descended into a rout.
Now, forced to defend the outer fortifications of Mequon itself, Iroh’s forces were pinned down and unable to organize. Colonel Jenju had deployed her two massive tension catapults, named Ying and Wang for the twin Spirits of the Underworld, just outside the range of the Fire Nation ballistae along the city’s outer wall. For three hours these fearsome pieces of artillery had blasted huge sections of the outer wall to pieces with stones that weighed several tons each.

The Earth Kingdom line halted its advance. The front rank of the enemy, their round helmets illuminated by the firebender’s art, moved in frightening unison to create a low wall and a trench which they manned instantly. There they stayed while Ying and Wang alternated firing their massive stone projectiles at the rapidly disintegrating metal barrier protecting Mequon. Even in the moonlight their enormous size and solid construction made them clearly visible from the Fire Nation lines.

“What the hell are they doing? Why aren’t they attacking?” yelled a severe looking shaven headed soldier who had rolled down next to the Crown Prince. He wore a captain’s uniform, golden earrings in his nose and ears, and a topknot.

“They stopped to give their artillery enough time to finish breaching the outer wall,” the young general replied amidst the sound of the next titanic impact.

“Who the hell is in charge of this operation anyway!?” cried a nameless soldier from above him.

“I don’t know,” Iroh shouted over the din, “but they ought to burn him!”

Several nearby soldiers voiced hearty agreement at this sentiment. Behind them another soldier screamed in high pitched, blood curdling agony, and then stopped.

“We’ve got to get rid of those catapults!” the shaven officer exclaimed in frustration.

“Yes, Captain,” the young general agreed instantly, “and I’m going to need you to figure out how we’re going to make that happen.”

The severe looking man suddenly focused on Iroh, his expression hard and calculating.

“Who are you?”

Iroh turned to look at the shaven headed officer full on.

“I am General Iroh, and your name, Captain?”

The severe young officer saluted as best he could from a prone position and smiled fiercely in recognition. A shower of stone fragments rained down from a nearby impact.

“Captain Mongke, your Highness, and my men and I would be glad to get this done for you. We’ll scout ‘round and report back.”

“Very good, Captain,” Iroh replied, pleased at Mongke’s attitude, “and in the meantime I’ll get this mess back in order.”

“Right! Kachi!” the shaven man shouted to the nameless soldier who had spoken earlier, “Let’s go!”

The Crown Prince and the captain rolled out from underneath their temporary shelter to make good on their promises. Iroh knew both tasks would be easier said than done.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Hours had passed. After reestablishing communication, the Fire Nation line had finally stabilized.
amidst the ruins of the outer wall. Massive rocks still rained down from the mighty catapults of the enemy, but the defenders shot them out of the sky and made great use of the cover offered by the wreckage. The eastern gate still stood, but the northern tower and its ballista had been destroyed a short while before.

Iroh watched, drenched in sweat, as waves of green clad pike men retreated across the burning no man’s land that had developed between the two armies. The opponents were evenly matched and now that the Fire Nation forces had reorganized the conflict had rapidly become a bloody war of attrition. Both sides had counterattacked and failed. The only visible change was the drumbeat of the huge Earth Kingdom catapults which made steady progress dismantling the outer wall of the city.

His body protested as it seldom had before. He surveyed his own lines once more from his makeshift headquarters, or as much of them as could be seen from the light of the burning landscape. The red clad soldiers were exhausted. Every one of them had heard about the nightmare of Cemetery Ridge, but none of these men had experienced it. Now, hard pressed themselves, they wondered how much harder it must have to been to be surrounded and without hope on that distant lake shore.

Whatever hope the soldiers took from such reflection was lost on their commander. The few moments that battle allowed his mind to wander brought punishing guilt for their current predicament. The plan had been for him to pin Jenju down, not vice versa. He had lost thousands of soldiers in minutes, been forced back to the city itself where his forces were literally jammed up against a rapidly disintegrating wall, and was a heartbeat away from losing the entire colony regardless of the outcome elsewhere.

A messenger approached the Crown Prince. She was filthy and ragged, her sleeves bearing the burn marks of her own firebending. She saluted and handed the general two scraps of paper. Iroh read them quickly. Colonel Hirano, in command of the left flank, needed direction on how to meet the cavalry charge soon expected in that quarter.

Iroh made a motion without looking at the runner who produced a writing implement at the unspoken command and handed it over. The young general then sat heavily on a keg and used an adjacent stack of boxes as a desk.

“Any sappers?” the young general inquired as he scribbled the instructions.

“Yes, sir,” the woman replied, “Two tunnels under Twelfth Infantry.”

“We heard some explosions about a half hour ago,” Iroh murmured, “was that it?”

“Yes, sir, both were blown as soon as we felt the vibrations.”

“They’ll go deeper next time,” he predicted.

“Yes, General,” the messenger agreed grimly, “that’s what they did at Edo.”

Azulon’s looked up briefly to see the woman’s face. She was probably a little younger than he, but she had lived a lifetime and it showed. He looked down to finish penning the orders.

“What else?”

“Colonel Nguyen has been badly wounded. Major Han is now in command of Fourth Infantry.”

Iroh grunted in acknowledgement. Nguyen was a good soldier, but prone to expose himself in combat. Han was capable and would likely soon be promoted given this news.
“Also, Captain Mongke and his men have returned with a prisoner, your Highness.”

He stood and handed the scraps of paper back.

“Send them to me, and take this to Colonel Hirano. Have the other taken by the next runner in the queue to Colonel Jian.”

The messenger saluted and left.

A few minutes later Captain Mongke returned with his small band of soldiers. A man in manacles walked between them. The prisoner wore faded blue pants of an unfamiliar material, a wide brimmed hat and over his chest what looked like a blanket or cloak with a hole in the center for his head. The cloak was grey, brown and white and barely decorated with a simple geometric pattern.

“Good news, General,” the bald roughneck began without preamble, “The dirt slingers have a lot of gaps in their lines, so we were able to scout out a way to get to those monster catapults pretty much undetected.”

This was as much as Iroh had dared hope.

“Excellent, Captain, did you get a good look at them?”

Mongke proceeded to give a first hand account of the artillery’s size, construction and camp disposition.

“There’s probably another dozen smaller artillery pieces on the low ridge immediately north as well,” he concluded, “but they aren’t the problem. The problem is the artillery operators and the dirt slingers they have guarding them. There must two or three hundred enemy at all times.”

Iroh grunted at the implication. Even if Mongke and his men accepted a suicide mission, the likelihood of success with a straight up firebending raid was low.

“Well, we better think of something, Captain, before they tighten up their lines,” then, indicating the captive, “So who’s this?”

Mongke motioned to his men to have the prisoner brought forth.

“A little keepsake, sir, we captured him on the way back. He was trying to cross over to the enemy. We thought he might be a Water Tribe spy, so we brought him in for questioning.”

Iroh examined the stranger. His face was weather beaten. The prisoner squinted narrowly at the young general. His eyes, cold and flinty, calmly assessed everything around him. He looked as if he had traveled many lifetimes on dusty roads seldom used. Iroh had never seen anyone like him before.

“He was carrying these,” Mongke continued, “We think they’re weapons of some kind.”

The muscle bound captain passed over to Iroh a dark leather belt with two holsters and dozens of small metal tubes held fast by tight leather loops. From each of the holsters a wooden handle protruded.

“Weapons?” Iroh asked, touching one of the handles lightly.

The prisoner nodded, his expression impassive.

“Are you Water Tribe? You don’t look like it.”
“No, General,” the prisoner replied in a soft, even voice that betrayed a touch of steel.

“Where are you from then?”

The prisoner looked briefly at the ground then back at the Crown Prince.

“Ellinoy.”

The name was foreign and Iroh didn’t quite catch it.

“Never heard of it. Where is that?”

“East, I believe.”

“Is that where you’re going?”

“That’s the idea, General… but I understand it’s hard to get there these days.”

Iroh considered this briefly then shook his head.

“I don’t have time for games, my friend; can you tell me why I shouldn’t have you reduced to ashes right now and be done with you? In case you can’t tell, I’ve got bigger problems.”

“Yes,” the stranger acknowledged, shooting a quick glance in the direction of the enormous Earth Kingdom siege engines laying waste to the city, “two big problems as a matter of fact. I might be able to help you with those… if I’m not a pile of ashes, that is.”

“Oh,” Iroh queried, his eyebrow arching, “how is that?”

“Well,” he replied, pointing with a manacled hand at the stack of boxes Iroh had used to write his orders, “if you give me a few charges of that blasting powder over there… and let me go on my way... you might hear something you like if you keep your ears open.”

Mongke nudged the prisoner in a gesture of suspicion.

“Really, stranger? What’s to stop you from throwing those charges right back at us?”

“Because you’re going to carry them for me, Captain,” the weather beaten drifter responded as if the matter had already been settled, “and because I need to cross this battlefield… and this is the only way.”

Mongke started and looked quickly over at his superior. Whatever he was, the stranger exuded an aura of quiet confidence, a fact which both he and Iroh appreciated.

“Is that so?” Mongke finally responded, openly intrigued by the suggestion.

“Well, Captain,” the Crown Prince offered, “that was your plan anyway, right?”

“Yes, General, as a matter of fact it was, or Vachir’s anyway.”

At this the black clad soldier with a face shield next to Mongke crossed his arms.

Iroh looked the prisoner up and down once again. A decision had to be made. From the quiet corners of his mind Fate spoke to him.

“He’s your risk if you take him, Captain, so I leave the decision to you.”
The prisoner looked over at his captor, his hard, bright eyes boring into him.

“We’ll take him, General,” Mongke said finally after exchanging glances with each of his men, “I don’t know where he’s from, but as long as he’s not a dirt slinger or a snow savage I don’t care. He’s a hard case, like us… and hard cases are needed for this job.”

After a moment the prisoner lifted his manacled hands in obvious suggestion. Mongke gestured to the soldier Iroh knew now to be named Kachi. Extremely broad and powerfully built, Kachi stepped forward and produced a small metal needle which he used to unlock the manacles. Once removed the stranger rubbed his wrists and looked over first at Iroh, then at the belt he still held in his hands.

Iroh looked down at the belt himself then back at its owner. In one swift motion he tossed it over. The stranger caught it and secured it around his waist, the wooden handles barely protruding from underneath his cloak.

“How long will you need?”

“About half an hour, your Highness,” Mongke replied, “if we don’t run into pickets. No matter what though we’ll need some help to escape.”

“Don’t worry, Captain, the moment you light them up that will be our signal to attack.”

Two of Mongke’s men opened the top most box on the stack next to the barrel and removed several explosive charges. They would need them if sappers were detected in the area, but Mongke only needed two bundles.

“Play me false, stranger, and we won’t be the only ones to die, I promise you,” Mongke threatened.

The drifter did not reply. Instead he looked once again at Iroh. He touched the rim of his hat in a gesture of respect.

“General.”

He turned to leave, the others preparing to follow.

“One more thing.”

The piercing eyes turned back to the Crown Prince.

“Out of curiosity, friend… Have you ever heard of a place called… West Portal?”

The weathered man nodded.

“Yeh, a real tragedy… almost as bad as Zeneca,” then with a glint in his hard eyes continued, “Out of curiosity, General… why do you ask?”

“I don’t know.”

Iroh waited.

“Best to keep out of things like that, General, you have enough on your hands. Besides… that was a long time ago, and the world has moved on.”

He tipped his hat once again and left, his new Fire Nation companions close behind.
Chapter Summary

Prince Iroh unleashes a devastating new weapon of mass destruction against the Earth Kingdom defenders...

The *Inferno* rocketed over the steppes. Gan leaned over the pilot’s shoulder to look out the glass windshields that fronted the mighty leviathan. The land lay still and quiet in the fragile darkness that exists only just before sunrise. Ahead he could see the running lights of *Corona* receding into the distance. Moments later a series of rapid flashes flickered from her stern. Soon, he knew, the communications officer would present him with a translation of the coded message *Corona* was transmitting.

Around them Nikon’s entire armored force labored to maintain pace with the tank trains. Although only a fraction of what had disembarked at Gela many months ago, the Fire Nation armor, concentrated now in one formation, nevertheless offered an impressive spectacle.

The message was delivered. Gan barely glanced at it. He knew what it must say.

“Okay,” he announced to the bridge crew, “park this damn thing.”

Chief Tang tapped the pilot on the shoulder and then bounced over to the chief engineer’s station.

“Aye, Captain, but please don’t call the *Inferno* a “damn thing,” she scolded, a contented smile on her face, “She’s the best tank train in the fleet!”

Gan grimaced. He liked Tang, but she was like a broken wind clock, endlessly announcing the same time to everyone in earshot.

“I stand corrected, Chief,” Gan offered with a rueful expression, “and I am… uh… thoroughly repentant.”

Tang arched an eyebrow, her smile growing wider.

“If you dropped the “uhhh” I might even believe you, sir,” and then, her grin growing mischievous, “Still, let’s see how you feel about her after some real combat.”

As instructed the Chief Boiler Operator had shown her quality by training him in both the theory and practice of running a dreadnought in extremely short order. Clearly no fool, she peppered her training with the lessons learned from hard battle experience, including the circumstances surrounding the death of her former captain whom she and the crew had greatly respected if not loved. Equally clear was her commitment and dedication to her crewmates, the army, and to the Fire Nation.

The *Inferno* slowed to a stop.

“Shall we start the conversion?” she asked hopefully.

Gan shivered slightly at the question. Tang was bubbly, boisterous and impossibly nice. The contrasts visible in his subordinate were stark and raised questions in his own mind he had never
before entertained. This sweet, adorable person was happy to kill thousands in one blow. Was he? He shoved the question from his mind. It wasn’t relevant. He was going to do it whether he was pleased or not. He would give the order, they would do the shooting. He had not processed it yet, but the difference between accounting for deaths and causing them had already settled about his neck like a millstone. He doubted again his suitability for command.

The reluctant leader first eyed the chronometer and then the horizon out the window.

“Yes, Chief, let’s get a move on. It’s almost dawn… coming up on show time.”

“Right!”

The pilot had already left his seat to help deploy the rocket sleds. Gan looked ahead once again to see Corona had likewise come to a stop.

Gan strode over to the periscope, already lowered and waiting patiently for its master. The new captain produced a tablet from his tunic and flipped it open to the firing tables he had received from Chieng. He peered through the instrument to begin his calculations. Only now did he remember the engineer’s implicit insult when she had forced on him this dubious “promotion”.

“Almost” as good at calculations as she is? Who does she “calculate” she is? We’ll see who gets their money’s worth, lady!

He quickly busied himself in figures and equations, relieved to put the uncomfortable thoughts he had been entertaining from his mind, pausing every now and again to look through the scope and adjust the view.

On the gently rolling hills of the steppes he found he had an unobstructed view for many miles in any direction. Corona was perhaps a league to the northwest of their present position. Behind them, he knew, Firestorm and Nova completed the chain and were separated from each other by similar distances. They all lay broadside; their bows pointed roughly north, the armored forces arrayed between them.

To their west, still obscured by the darkness, but no more than a few miles away, lay the great Field of Coins, a vast open expanse of ground dominated by hundreds of stone disks. Most of these were sunk into the ground to varying depths. Some lay flat on their exposed sides. All had raised rims and squares cut into their centers like Earth Kingdom coins.

The calculations complete, he flipped the book shut with a snap and replaced it in his tunic.

Gan threw open the hatch and jumped down. To the east the first rosy fingers of dawn stained the eastern sky. Within minutes the sun would peak over the horizon. His crew had already opened all the firing compartments. They were now turning the cranks to aim the sleds. Rockets jutted visibly from the end of each tube. The new captain surveyed the infernal projectiles with a skeptical eye.

He heard Tang come up beside him, her footsteps already familiar enough that he knew it was she without even looking.

“Are these things going to work, Tang?” he asked, waving an arm at the sleds.

“Oh yes, sir!” she replied with complete confidence, “I conducted the field tests with Chieng. As long as we get the range and the elevation correct, we’re going to get our money’s worth in dead Earthie’s, promise!”

He turned to look at her as she replied, noting that there now enough light to see her features.
“Bravely spoken,” the new Captain replied, concealing his surprise at the Chief’s casual use of her superior’s given name, “But I do hope you’re right… for all our sakes.”

She saluted and took off at a run to help deploy the sleds.

He pulled out the sight glass from his tunic and surveyed the chosen battlefield once more. He drew a sharp breath, for there the rapidly lightening sky revealed the terrifying sight of thousands upon thousands of the Earth Kingdom’s finest infantry marching, rank upon rank, into the slaughterhouse carefully selected for their destruction. In front of them he could see the clearly exhausted garrison troops of Mequon running before them. They had clearly lost many in their retreat from the now abandoned town of Vyazma.

He scanned south and west. There he could see the Hue Road, which met the Silk Road northeast of Mequon, stretching like a dusty ribbon in the distance. There he knew lay Tien Shin’s entire Second Corps, concealed in a series of hastily dug trenches on the far side of the road.

Gan should have been pleased. Within minutes the densely packed enemy formations would find themselves placed squarely between Tien Shin’s infantry to the south and west of the Field of Coins and the armored forces and artillery to its east. He wasn’t. They had enough rockets for only a few volleys. Each one had to count.

Tang bounded over from the rearmost sled.

“Good news, Captain, all sleds are unwound. All cars are now balanced, secure on their supports, and ready to discharge.”

The former accountant grunted in acknowledgement. Using another instrument he quickly performed a star sighting to confirm their position. He could only hope the Firestorm, the other rocket sled, was in the correct position as well.

The Chief coughed, obviously waiting for the last instructions.

“It’s time, Captain,” she prompted.

Gan sighed and gave her the final firing settings. Distance, elevation, azimuth, wind correction, propellant charge and missile ballistics had to be properly accounted – and he was the best accountant in the Empire. She nodded and departed to make the last adjustments.

It would have to do.

The sleds were prepared to fire. Tang rejoined him and bellowed in a voice much larger than her thin frame seemed to allow.

“Firing positions!”

Within seconds a lone firebender stood behind each bank of rockets. The rest of the technicians and boiler operators disappeared into the engine. Tang handed Gan a pair of ear plugs and showed him quickly how to put on his own. To the east the sun could only be moments away from peeking over the horizon.

He looked through the sight glass once more. The bulk of the enemy was now in the coin field. Unable to resist, many formations had stopped to pull the coins out of the ground to use as weapons against the bedraggled Fire Nation garrison that fled before them.

*Not yet... wait... wait... almost...* he thought.
As the final seconds slipped away he recalled the farewell with his friends the day before. He had departed at nearly the same time in the morning, just before sunrise.

The pebbles crunched under his boots as he approached the two men standing next to the Inferno. One was the Crown Prince, the other daimyo Orlando. Around them hundreds of tank crewman mounted their machines in preparation for immediate departure. Gan stood back to let his friends finish their goodbye, but he was close enough that he could not help but overhear their conversation even with the din around them.

“Haven’t we been here before?” the young commoner asked with more than a trace of vexation.

“Get used to it, my friend,” Iroh replied with a bitter laugh, “A general and his daimyo seldom see battle together, just as the columns that hold the weight of the greatest buildings often stand far apart. We each have our own tasks.”

“Am I supposed to find that comforting?” Nikon asked with some cheek, “Any other parting wisdom? Or shall we skip to the calming tea?”

“That actually sounds like a wonderful idea, but no, I don’t think we have time for tea this morning.”

“Parting wisdom then?”

“No, no wisdom, but final instructions, yes.”

Iroh looked over and saw his grey uniformed friend. He smiled warmly and beckoned him over.

“Good morning, Captain Shu!”

“Morning, Gan!” Nikon offered with a wry smile, “Ready for the big day?”

“No,” the not quite former accountant replied, “I’m not. This is a mistake, I mean, me running a tank train, in command of, you know… people.”

“Now, now, my friend,” Azulon’s son broke in, placing an understanding hand on Gan’s shoulder, “We’ve been over this. You’ve been drafted and there isn’t a thing you can do about it.”

“I know, Iroh, and as Nikon just observed, I think we’ve been here before.” He crossed his arms across his chest for emphasis.

His friends laughed at the shared moment of gallows humor. Both knew he was referring to the fateful evening on the observation deck of the Sulaco the night before they had sailed. The black scroll bearing the imperial seal had contained his unwanted appointment to the office of Qu’ai Tau. That seemed a different lifetime to all of them. A time of hope, innocence and boundless confidence that could now only be seen as if through a glass, and darkly even at that.

“What the hell are those?” Gan asked, pointing at several oblong metal objects hanging from Nikon’s girdle.

“Oh, presents from Chieng,” he replied, pulling one off his belt and examining it.

“What do they do?”

“They blow up. You twist the tops and throw them. She said they might come in handy, and I’m inclined to agree with her. I haven’t tried one yet though.”
“Oh, and how much did these cost?”

Nikon coughed.

“Oh, she didn’t say.”

Iroh laughed.

“Liar,” Gan accused.

“Let’s just say she wouldn’t let him test one because there aren’t very many of them,” Iroh inserted.

Gan threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust.

“Okay, what’s this then about final instructions?” Gan asked, deciding to change the subject, “If you’re so certain I can do this job then why does it sound like you’re going to be handing out black scroll cases?”

Nikon shuddered at the thought.

“Nothing written, so it’s best you both hear this,” Iroh replied turning back to the daimyo, his expression suddenly grim, “But it is the subject I know you both dread most. Still, I must do my best to prepare you for the worst.”

Iroh turned to look his daimyo square in the eye.

“Nikon, if I should fall, you will be in command.”

“Tien Shin will never accept that, Iroh,” his friend replied instantly, for he had obviously given thought to this grim possibility.

“No, he won’t,” the Crown Prince replied evenly, “and for that reason I strongly recommend that you have him arrested the moment you receive word of my death.”

Iroh’s friends stared at him in shocked silence.

“Furthermore,” their leader continued, his voice cold and hard as adamant, “For both your sakes, for Chieng’s, for Rhiannon’s and above all for the sake of the Fire Nation, I recommend that you execute him in some out of the way place with no witnesses as soon as he is delivered to you.”

They were stunned. Nikon’s mouth hung open. He had just been ordered, even if conditionally, to summarily execute a member of the royal family. More importantly, his friend had ordered him to commit political murder. He hated and feared Tien Shin, but could he do… that? Would he be any better than the hated prince whom he believed guilty of Xian’s murder?

“Iroh…” he finally stammered, “I don’t think I could ever…”

“Yes, you can,” Iroh suddenly thundered, “You must! If I fall you must act to protect our friends – your friends! You must act to protect yourself! And above all you must act to protect the Fire Nation! You know my step brother too well to doubt what would happen to those we love most if Tien Shin were to come to power! They will die – burned to ashes in front of you if he does not kill you first!”

His words cracked like thunder. Nikon closed his eyes, a pained expression on his face. He knew the Crown Prince was correct, but that did that make it any better? Was murder for gain any better than murder driven by fear of crimes a person hadn’t yet committed? The conversation with Rhiannon on the battlements of Mequon rang through his head, but the memory suggested no resolution.
Iroh looked over at Gan and asked without a trace of humor, “Want to trade places with him, Captain?”

“No,” the man in grey replied with complete honesty, “Not for any money,” then, addressing Nikon quietly, “He’s right, Nikon, if it comes to it, Tien Shin will have to die, quickly and quietly.”

“I’m sorry to lay this burden on you, my friend,” Iroh continued, the heat in his voice replaced by sadness, “I would do it myself, but as long as I live it is not necessary and truth be told we need him in this battle.”

Nikon looked up and answered in a steely voice.

“I understand, your Highness.”

“What?” Iroh prompted, for clearly his friend had more to say.

Nikon bit his lip and blurted, “Would you tell me to do the same if it were Prince Ozai?”

Iroh nodded once and replied without rancor.

“A fair question, but no, Nikon, I would not. I know my brother. Ask yourself, would Prince Ozai put you to death? No, you are neither a threat nor an obstacle to him. Tien Shin on the other hand will kill you without hesitation. Would my brother condemn Rhiannon to a fate worse than death? You heard Tien Shin yourselves. Her only escape from the wretched slavery that awaits her will be suicide. Would my brother prosecute Gan or Chieng for treason? Tien Shin and Macro will prosecute them both without me to protect them.”

“Why Chieng?” Nikon replied in sudden confusion.

“She chose her fate when she supported me taking command,” Iroh responded in a tense voice.

“More importantly,” the young general continued, “I am asking you to help protect my brother as well, for if I should die, he alone will stand between Tien Shin and the throne of the Fire Nation.”

Nikon met his commander’s eyes, doubt and indecision still written in them. Then, his decision made, the daimyo nodded in acceptance of his orders and dropped his gaze.

“Don’t despair, Nikon,” the Crown Prince continued, attempting to soften the blow he knew he had just delivered, “Despite what I have just said, I assure you I have no intention of dying today!”

Iroh turned to Gan.

“I have always been proud to have your friendship, Gan, but today you are going to shine brighter than you ever have before. Today you will be a hero of the Fire Nation, and Nikon and I will tell stories of you to our grandchildren and yours. Your father will be proud.”

Gan actually felt himself blush, though his friends could not see it in the early light of dawn.

“Your Highness,” he acknowledged formally with a slight bow. He found himself suddenly too choked to say any more.

Iroh hugged them both once and released them. He turned to leave, but reversed himself suddenly in one quick motion, his countenance once again tense. The young general opened his mouth to speak, but stopped.

Gan and Nikon shared a quick glance.
“Hey,” the daimyo chided with a gentle, genuine smile, “Don’t worry so much. If anyone should worry about her… it’s the enemy!”

Months before he would have uttered such a sentiment as insult. Now, they knew, it was a compliment of the highest order.

Nikon saluted and quickly mounted his tank. He looked once more at Iroh, an expression of fear and doubt clouding his face.

“Iroh, if anything happens to me out there…”

“What?” his friend responded sharply, turning his face away with a severe expression. “We’ve gone over this before! You survived the worst defeat in Fire Nation history and nothing’s happening to you now! I forbid it!”

Nikon paused a moment before replying, “If only we could, Iroh… if we could forbid things like that Xian would still be alive, wouldn’t he? The world moves on… no matter what we intend.”

He wanted to say more, but he knew Iroh did not want to hear it. Nikon saluted, wrapped twice on the Fury’s turret and the engine flared to life. Moments later the air was filled with the sound of hundreds of engines turning over at once.

The daimyo waved to his friends once more and was gone.

“He owes her his life, Iroh,” Gan shouted the noise of departure, “He won’t let her down out there or you – and neither will I for that matter.”

Iroh’s countenance was troubled, but he smiled and saluted his friend.

“I know, Gan,” he replied, “Now go and get our money’s worth, okay?”

Gan returned the salute, his expression hardening.

“You bet your ass!”

Iroh roared with laughter as Gan stepped up into the Inferno, her engines flaring to life.

The memory blew away like dandelion seeds in the wind as the sun peeked over the horizon. The reluctant dreadnought captain lifted his sight glass once more. The Field of Coins was awash with Earth Kingdom infantry and the wheel and roil of hundreds of gigantic stone disks.

Gan froze.

A large portion of the enemy infantry had just broken from the pursuit of the colonial troops and was turning to face them.

Colonel Liu had marched for hours with his soldiers, but he was not tired. Years of exertion over dozens of campaigns had hardened him and his companions against any physical discomfort. Around them the green clad infantry delighted in picking up and rolling the mighty stone discs that populated the gentle hills like some strange peach melon orchard.

He lifted his sight glass and peered south and west at their prey. The constant whirl and spin of the great coins ran across his field of vision created the impression he was enduring one of those
pointless army eye exams. Still, it did not prevent him from surveying the situation. A smile played on his lips as he surveyed the rapidly closing gap between his right flank and the enemy. His maroon swathed opponents were ragged, exhausted and clearly running out of room to maneuver. He estimated contact on the right within a half hour.

_Not bad, he thought, pretty close to what we expected._

“Not bad, Colonel!” his aide announced happily from his side in an eerie echo of the Colonel’s own internal voice, “What do you think, half an hour maybe?”

“Yes, about that,” the heavy set commander agreed.

He chuckled quietly to himself. Soon these Fire Nation murderers, masters of the “superior element”, would be force fed a massive stack of two ton coins.

The sun peaked over the horizon. Reflexively he turned to the east to greet the new day.

Liu froze.

There, clearly silhouetted by the new sun, lay a neat line of shadows. He recognized them instantly, his mind filling in the details obscured by the shade. Small in the distance, perhaps no more than a league away, was a large formation of Fire Nation tanks. Worse, he could pick out periodically along the line the larger shadows that must surely be the dreaded leviathans that had nearly turned the Battle of Lake Myojin against them.

He fumbled quickly to bring the sight glass up to his face. What he saw rapidly confirmed his worst fears. Unable to turn from the horror he observed, Liu grabbed the adjutant by his shoulder without looking at him.

“It’s a trap! Signal the right and center to retreat! Now!”

The aide turned east and froze in turn.

“Left flank!” Liu thundered in a voice that rose over the din of marching feet and rolling coins, “Turn and charge! Forward for the Earth Kingdom!”

The signalmen nearby immediately began the display of the different flags in careful order to communicate the Colonel’s hastily shouted instruction. The signalmen farther afield picked up the code and duplicated it. Like a rusty old battleship, the First Division slowed to a stop and began to turn on its left point, wheeling around to face the east.

Colonel Liu held on to his aide’s shoulder with an iron grip.

“Pray, Lieutenant, pray we have enough time.”

This was it. The enemy had seen them and was reacting.

Gan had been certain that when the time came he would be thinking about the millions of gold pieces he would be launching into thin air.

He was wrong. All the things he had held so dear, the gold, the debits and credits, the mountains of scrolls, books and tablets meant nothing. The endless arguments back at the Ministry over methods of financing the national debt and whether it was best to use monetary or fiscal policy to curb
runaway inflation occupied no part of his consciousness whatsoever.

Out here there was only the advancing green wave and the agony of anticipation for combat to commence. There was nothing else. The soldiers, red and green, the weapons, the armor, all were shadows. The world had been reduced to a single point, a white hot speck of purpose and will. He finally knew what Nikon meant when he had babbled about “tunnel vision” in combat.

He was experiencing it now. Years later, and for the rest of his life, he reflected on how he never felt more alive than at this moment.

Iroh’s friend stood in the well of the Inferno’s single siphon, for the rocket sleds only had one, his upper body exposed to allow him to take advantage of the excellent panoramic view. He looked down at the four master firebenders who stood far behind each of the rocket sleds. They looked up at him expectantly. He raised one hand over his head.

The hand came down in one swift motion.

“Fire!”

In unison the four firebenders swung their left arms in a wide semicircle, white sparks instantly spitting from their hands and finger tips. As their left arms completed their swings they began the same motion with their opposite arms. With their right arms crackling and popping, they quickly brought their middle and index fingers of each hand together.

Bright, jagged arcs of electricity shot from the hand of each firebender and struck the exposed rear of the launch tubes.

The sound, even through ear plugs, was earth shattering. The propellant ignited on each rocket struck by the lightning. Instantly white hot jets of flame shot from the rear of the tubes as each projectile launched. The rockets whistled with a high pitch squeal that changed in tenor as it exited the firing tube and arced across the sky. They sprang forth one every few seconds from each of the four sleds.

Gan put his hands over his ears in a desperate attempt to protect his eardrums. He automatically knelt down in the well of the siphon in fear of getting burned by the exhaust. Peering over the rim of the well he could see and hear the Firestorm discharging her rockets several miles away.

Suddenly all was silent. As the Fire Nation’s weapons of mass destruction streaked through the sky towards their targets, Gan stood up to examine their effect. The Earth Kingdom forces arrayed against them stood transfixed almost to a man, for they had never seen such a sight before. Beautiful and elegant, for most it was their last.

The rockets arced, reached their zenith, descended and disappeared into the mass of green clad soldiers. Instantaneously the battlefield was illuminated in a series of brilliant white flashes that blinded all participants, followed closely by several expanding incandescent clouds that blossomed like mushrooms and spread over the ground. Dozens of smaller explosions flashed in the air above the earth, producing small puffs of black smoke. From the Inferno’s position the first seconds of the delivery transpired in silence, but the silence was soon shattered by the reports of the rockets impacts.

Gan stared in horror at the display of firepower. In seconds the Field of Coins was transformed into a sea of white hot flame. Huge columns of white smoke rose into the air, drifting gently in the westerly breeze.

Of the Earth Kingdom soldiers and their stone discs who had occupied the field moments before there was not a single trace.
The Sound and the Fury

Chapter Summary

Victory at the Field of Coins... Tien Shin surveys the havoc wreaked by the Fire Nation weapons of mass destruction.

Tien Shin observed the results of the rocket attack with satisfaction. Liu’s daughter and the accountant had done their jobs well. Too bad they would have to die as soon as they returned home, if not before. The girl was brilliant and creative, to be sure, but her now obvious preference for the Crown Prince necessitated her removal. A regrettable waste, but, she wasn’t the only gifted inventor in the Fire Nation. Gan, of course, as a known supporter of his idiot step-brother, had been marked for elimination long before.

As the glowing white plasma finally burned low he could see that easily a third of the Earth Kingdom force had been obliterated in a single stroke. A second strike some time later had anticipated the direction of the enemy’s retreat and delivered a second, equally crushing blow. The entire eastern horizon had been transformed in minutes into a boiling, smoke filled hell that bore no resemblance to the serene landscape of grass and grain waving gently in the wind that it had been when they arrived.

The elder prince knew the Earth Kingdom would probably never again march into combat in such close formation, but that did not in any way dampen his pleasure at the destruction he witnessed before him. The accountant was correct about the massive and probably prohibitive expense of this new weaponry, but in specific circumstances such as this, its power could no longer be doubted.

The balance of Colonel’s Liu’s ill-fated Second Corps staggered, half blinded and choked with the stench and smoke of chemical fire, towards his own lines. Desperately trying to escape the chaos, the Earth Kingdom survivors appeared to have no idea that they marching straight into five legions of the Fire Lord’s best.

“Yes... yes...that’s right little dirties... come and get it...”

Still, he grudgingly admired their discipline. The green clad men and women who marched out of that hellish nightmare did so without breaking formation or dropping their weapons. Many were obviously wounded, either burned or bleeding from fragmentation shells. Several had even retained control over the huge coins they had picked up from the field behind them. What a shame they too had to die. He did not approve of waste, even of dirt slingers.

The elder prince adjusted the chin strap on his helmet and prepared to mount the trench wall. He straightened the tunic underneath his lacquered steel breastplate, repaired and once again resplendent with the emblem of the Fire Nation.

As he marveled at the endurance of his enemy, his mind recounted the events of the past day which had led to this moment. After a forced march from Mequon they had arrived late in the afternoon the day before. The next six hours had been spent digging the shallow ditches that they had then used as cover before getting as much rest as they could and camouflaging the artillery that Chieng’s leviathans had deposited as they passed. The hour before sunrise had been spent in quiet desperation awaiting the enemy’s inevitable arrival and in prayer to Agni for victory.
Now it was time.

Tien Shin mounted the trench wall in one swift motion. As he stood he drew his breath and rapid fired a single fireball high into the air.

At this signal the entire first rank of red armored soldiers duplicated his movement. Tien Shin moved forward, the first rank behind followed swiftly by the second, then the third and still more. Looking briefly to his left and right he could see the division commanders mirrored his position. Commander Tojo on his right answered with a fireball of his own.

“Good,” he thought, “Madness this may be, but we will win this fight today. The Fire Lord will be pleased.”

Still, he could not help but feel appalled that he was helping his idiot step brother win the victory he so desperately needed to avoid his own execution. He brushed aside the wave of nausea that threatened to engulf him. There would be time enough to deal with Iroh, if he did not get himself killed first. After all, as this ridiculous gambit proved, his judgment was no better than his cousin’s.

Perhaps he’d die fighting the Earth Kingdom First Corps outside Mequon while he won the battle here.

The elder prince allowed himself a grin at this thought, “Go and get yourself killed, “brother”, do yourself and the Fire Nation a favor!”

The game with Iroh had gone on far too long and he yearned for it to finally conclude. He looked forward both in fear and anticipation to the elimination of the final obstacle to his prize. Azulon’s younger son was plainly ambitious and not nearly the fool his elder brother had proven himself to be. That contest was sure to be an ugly, violent power play. He knew he needed to eliminate this emerging rival as soon as possible before he could grow any stronger.

“Thank heaven Iroh was born first instead of Ozai!” Tien Shin thought, and not for the first time, echoing the prayers of many, though for a much different reason than they.

The rapid advance of the enemy finally drove all other thoughts from his mind. Instantly his perception narrowed to only what he could see before him. The front ranks of the enemy reacted to the appearance of Tien Shin’s men with consternation, but their steady march forward did not abate. Many lowered face shields that had been raised to allow easier breathing amidst the smoke and stench of the rocket attack that still swirled around them. Others raised shields to deflect firebending attacks that were sure to come.

The elder prince estimated no more than ten minutes before the armies made contact, but by then, Tien Shin knew, the fate of the enemy would be sealed. The survivors would be perfectly exposed in the rear and flanks to Nikon’s armor. Knowing himself well, Tien Shin ruthlessly suppressed the hatred and animosity that instantly boiled up within him at the thought of the filthy commoner who now held his rightful position. That crime would be punished in due time.

With no more than a hundred yards between the opposing forces Tien Shin held up his right hand and tightened it into a fist. The Fire Nation army halted its advance. Without further orders, the front rank, composed entirely of benders, their terrifying face shields giving the impression of a well ordered host of red enameled demons, unleashed a unified arc of fire that exploded outwards towards the front ranks of the Earth Kingdom survivors. The first line quickly knelt, allowing the second line an unobstructed view of the enemy. A moment later, using an identical series of sharp motions, the second rank let loose another arc of flame.
The green clad soldiers roared a challenge and raised their shields to protect themselves as best they could from the rapidly approaching blasts. Most of the Earth Kingdom front line dropped to the ground behind their shields as the angry red arcs arrived, but the rear echelons, disoriented by the smoke and fire of the rocket attack, were not as fast. The arcs sailed over the front line and exploded all over the second and third. Hundreds caught fire or threw down their red hot shields onto the backs of their comrades in front of them.

Tien Shin noted that three points of Liu’s line had resisted the attack, all of which had the protection of several of the massive circular stones from the Field of Coins. Inconvenient, of course, but they would do them no good. He raised his hand once again and launched another ball of fire into the sky.

Now the catapults and ballistae, dug into deep pits and partially covered with faded green canvas, opened up at once. Balls of flaming pitch arced through the sky and slammed into the leading edge of the desperate green clad defenders. With peals like thunder, direct fire from the ballistae instantly shattered on impact the closest of the discs. The Earth Kingdom formations wavered, those that had sheltered behind the coins suffered most. The artillerymen reloaded their weapons feverishly.

The Fire Nation first line stood, launched another arc of fire, and quickly broke into groups of five or ten men arranged into lines perpendicular to the enemy. The second rank fired once more through the wide gaps afforded by the maniples of the first rank and then split in an identical fashion.

Instantly the third and later ranks, composed mostly of spearmen, charged through the corridors that now gave them direct access to the enemy. The rest of the army rapidly followed. Moments later, the battle was joined.

Liu swept the battlefield with the one eye still left him. He could not feel the left side of his face, nor the eye which had once set like a jeweled orb in its socket. The last thing it had seen was the beautiful, brilliant white flowers that had burst over their heads. The soft, ghostly tendrils of plasma had floated down upon their heads, instantly killing thousands with the massive heat that accompanied them. His eye and part of his face had boiled away instantly, the cauterization and shock stifling much of the pain.

As he had fallen to the ground he had seen a massive spark land on his aide. Liu tried to scream, but no sound emerged as the young man’s body melted as if it were made of wax. The tableau stretched nightmarishly for what seemed minutes, but in truth took no more than a few seconds. Beyond the rapidly liquefying corpse of his aide he saw, but did not hear, for he had lost the use of his ears, another rocket explode, this one blasting the field about them with bits of metal that eviscerated all those in sight who had not burned.

“But… they were beaten…” he thought dumbly as hell itself unfurled its bloody flag on earth.

His head lolled around almost aimlessly as his body struggled to cope with the shock of his injury. The whole battlefield was lit up brighter than daylight in blooming flowers of snow white plasma. Huge chunks of dirt and earth rained down as ejecta from some of the Fire Nation rockets which had impacted the ground. Massive clouds of white, acrid smelling smoke rapidly filled the air as the white glare of the incendiaries began to wane.

Suddenly he could feel his body again, though his face blissfully remained numb. He knew he would never live to see the damage in a lake or a mirror. He lifted himself to his feet, feeling as if he weighed more than one of the great stone coins which had foolishly proven such irresistible bait.
Without recognizing his own movement Liu found himself running with a small group of his men. They rolled two of the great stone coins with them. Few had profited from these artifacts under the bombardment, for those directly hit had disintegrated as easily as had the men.

Liu, now recognizing that he was deaf and blind in one eye, had helped them roll the coins. He shouted orders that he could only be sure were heard when the soldiers obeyed them. He knew their only hope was to retreat westward as fast as they were able and hope that the smoke and fire would prevent the enemy from following up on the devastation they had cause.

While the defenders struggled to escape the clouds of poisonous gas a messenger, spirits knew how she had survived, ran up to the Colonel and saluted. She handed him a scroll tube bearing the seal of Colonel Cho. He opened and read the report. Her handwriting was almost unrecognizable, whether she had been hurried, wounded or both he could not be sure. Perhaps it no longer mattered.

"Retreating west with regiments Xi, Bei, Fu and La toward the Hue Road. All others missing or destroyed. Fire Nation armor driving into our flanks. No contact with Fifth Division. Die well, Zen Liu."

Despair washed over him like a tidal wave. He cursed himself, closing his remaining eye in shame and gripping the scroll tube so hard it broke in his hand. Dimly he regretted feeling superior to the brash Colonel Fong. He knew his criticism had been just, but in the end it was he and not the young braggart who had brought his army to ruin.

Moments later, as he surveyed the ranks of Fire Nation infantry now charging towards his ragged line of wounded and burning soldiers, he knew all hopes of retreat were in vain.

Suddenly he saw familiar, terrifying white flashes out of the corner of his eye. He looked to the north, ignoring the advancing red wave of death, and through the drifting clouds of white smoke he saw another hail of ghostly white flowers fill the sky and drift slowly down to earth.

_Die well, Nujaree Cho._

He turned west to face his destiny. The last thing his right eye saw was the tall, proud Fire Nation soldier wearing a lacquered steel breastplate who slew him.

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The Captain of the _Inferno_ stood up in the siphon well and pulled the plugs out of his ears. Grey smoke wafted from each sled’s firing tube arrays. The tips of the barrels glowed a dull, angry red from the heat of three successive launches. Hands shaking from adrenalin and shock, Gan fumbled to produce his sight glass from his tunic. He scanned the battlefield for the umpteenth time.

The Field of Coins had been reduced in minutes to a burning, ash laden wasteland. Huge plumes of white, acrid smoke rose into the sky and drifted slowly to the north and west. Patches of ground still burned with the strange white fire that glowed like the sun. The corpses of soldiers charred beyond recognition littered the battlefield like a grotesque carpet of bone and metal.

Many of the great stone coins had shattered under the force of the explosions from the fragmentation rockets, instantly shredding the Earth Kingdom soldiers moving them. Others had caught fire from the ghostly, burning plasma that rained down from the incendiary rockets. These had rolled around, crushing and burning the soldiers around them until they finally capsized.

Nikon had followed the plan. Immediately after the second launch he had led the armor into action, driving through predetermined alleys in which they would be confident no rockets would fall. They
slowed as they reached the retreating clouds of poisonous gas, but quickly overtook large groups of disoriented Earth Kingdom stragglers. These were dispatched mechanically, without struggle or exertion.

They had just launched a third, and final, bank of rockets to the coordinates Gan had supplied in anticipation of the remaining enemy attempting to retreat to the north and west, away from the disaster area.

Suddenly there was someone next to him.

“Yes! Yes! Great Agni! Just look at that!”

Tang looked out over the carnage with undisguised glee. She hopped up and down in excitement, jostling the former accountant.

“You have problems,” Gan observed clinically, raising his voice to overcome the ringing in his ears despite the ear plugs, “You know that, right?

The Chief Boiler Operator lowered her sight glass and gave her captain a hurt look.

“You’re mean, Captain,” she accused, her lips pouting, “Can’t I be happy that we’ve won?”

“We haven’t won yet, Chief,” her captain corrected, “Though I grant you the Inferno’s weaponry is impressive almost beyond imagination.”

Pleased with the admission, she grinned in response and turned quickly back to the battlefield.

“I told you Captain, the Inferno’s the best in the fleet! And I don’t see how you can say we haven’t won! Look, there’s no enemy left out there! They were…” the bouncy engineer struggled for the right words, “they were… they were… totally incinerated!”

“I doubt it, Tang, but I wager Nikon and Tien Shin’s outfit will clean up the rest.”

“Then what’s there to stop us, sir?” she inquired, once again sweeping the battlefield with her sight glass.

She received no immediate reply. Gan had turned to face east. The sun had risen high into the sky. He estimated it was the third hour of the day. Sweeping the horizon with his sight glass he knew Chief Tang had tempted fate with her question.

Fate had taken little time to respond.

Gan tapped his companion on the shoulder. She turned to look at him.

“What’s to stop us, you ask? Look over there.”

She looked to the east. There in the distance she could see the market town of Vyzama and the wide, straight expanse of the Silk Road running through it.

The steppes around the town lay thick with a moving wall of green clad soldiers and ostrich horse cavalry. Even in the distance the emblem on the banners was clear.

“Nifong!” Tang gasped.

“Yes,” he acknowledged in a grimly, “it is the man himself.”
“What are we going to do, Captain!?" she asked, her voice and body suddenly rigid.

“Do?” he questioned calmly, “We’re going to stick to the plan.”

Captain Shu picked up the intercom speaker from its rocker on the rim of the siphon well and raised it to his lips, never taking his eyes off the green horror that flowed towards them. He drew a quick breath and blew through the tube to indicate a forthcoming announcement.

“Attention all hands! This is the Captain! Retract sleds, trim vents, close scoops and prepare for immediate departure! Communications, signal the rest of the fleet to evacuate and A-line the disengagement code to the daimyo’s column!”

Gan replaced the speaker and turned to Tang.

“You heard me, Chief, pack us up and get us out of here, now!”

“Yes, sir!”

Tang disappeared into the bowels of the leviathan.

Minutes later the *Inferno* raced westward, crossing in minutes the smoldering terrain of scarred and poisoned earth she had just created.
Iroh launches a daring counterattack and receives an unexpected messenger.

Ying and Wang had razed huge sections of Mequon’s outer wall, but they would never launch stone again. Iroh did not know their names, but he and every Fire Nation soldier manning the remains of the outer fortifications cheered the success of Captain Mongke and his strange prisoner. Just before dawn the massive siege engines had ignited one after the other in a dazzling display of spark and flame.

The Fire Nation army had attacked immediately as Iroh had promised. Battle now raged amongst the flaming and rapidly disintegrating towers of wood and metal. The clearing in which the great siege engines had been set up was choked in billowing clouds of thick, grey smoke that periodically left the combatants completely sightless. Iroh and the bulk of his First Corps had wisely approached from the windward side of the battlefield and had slain many defenders while they were disoriented from the smoke when they themselves were not.

Once the obvious targets had been eliminated, Iroh and his infantry had charged, sweeping clean the confused patch work of trenches and breastworks hastily erected by the advancing earthbenders the day before. The breach in the enemy front was wide and deep, the casualties minimal for the damage inflicted. Iroh and his immediate companions broke into the clearing occupied by the flaming siege engines with vengeful smiles and hearts thirsty for revenge.

The eldest son of the Fire Lord launched blasts of fire in rapid succession at the confused Earth Kingdom troops before him. Many wore the light green uniforms of the artillery battalions. Few of them were earthbenders and the grim Fire Nation infantry slew them without hesitation or mercy.

Suddenly the young general found himself knocked to the ground by a massive blow to the chest. Iroh instinctively rolled away from the direction of the strike, but he was struck again, this time on his back. His breastplate protected him from death as it had many times before, but he had the wind knocked out of him. As if from a distance he observed that he would be unable to firebend for the few seconds he knew he would need to save his life.

He rolled twice more and came up on his knees to see a huge green clad grenadier wielding spiked maces in each hand. His opponent’s armor identified him as an officer, and his grey hair and facial scars marked him as a veteran. He was joined by two other Earth Kingdom soldiers wearing the traditional round helmets and wielding the long spears favored by the cavalry.

Iroh stood, desperately trying to regain his breath. The grenadier strode forward, without a trace of emotion on his grizzled features, and raised his weapons to strike again. As his companions followed suit, a blast of fire struck the spearman on the right. Distracted for a split second, the grenadier shifted his stance towards the new threat. The young general seized the opportunity. He leapt forward and delivered his opponent two sharp blows to the neck, his trachea making a sickening, crunching sound as it collapsed in his throat.

The grenadier dropped his weapons and clutched desperately at his neck. Dreadful gurgling noises erupted from his mouth as he tried to breathe through his crushed windpipe. Iroh, still reeling and
trying to recover his own breath, narrowly avoided the other spearman’s well timed lunge. He managed to swallow a deep breath before grabbing the roundhead’s exposed spear shaft and yanking it out of his hands. The spearman barely had time to register his surprise before another blast of fire exploded in his face, killing him instantly.

Tilting the spear tip downwards, Iroh turned to where the grenadier had fallen heavily to the ground, his weapons useless beside him. Looking to where the other spearman had been, Iroh drove the spear squarely into the chest of the grenadier. The grizzled veteran had fought his last battle and his struggles soon ceased. With a twist Iroh removed the spear from the corpse and threw it to the ground.

The spearmen were dead. The battle continued around him, but the encounter was clearly over. The twin behemoths had collapsed as their structure burned.

Behind him Iroh saw several of the Fire Nation soldiers who had accompanied him on the charge. To his surprise he recognized one of them, Lieutenant Diem. Briefly he remembered the young soldiers’ reaction to his orders at Nomura. It seemed another lifetime, and though it was clearly the same person, Diem himself seemed a different man entirely. Gone was the wide eyed innocent who had recoiled in horror at the Crown Prince’s refusal to accept the surrender of an honorable opponent.

Captain’s bars now rested on his shoulders. His stance wide, his root solid, he had clearly just launched the blast that had felled the spearman on the young general’s left. Diem stood up straight, looking past his superior into empty space with a distant, vacant look, and saluted. The soldiers around him followed suit, their terrifying horned masks concealing their humanity.

Diem was also undeniably drunk. After saluting, he burped quietly and began to sway ever so slightly. He hadn’t shaved in days. His subordinates remained at attention and did not react.

Iroh, his breath restored, returned the salute and approached the younger man.

“Greetings, General, lovely night for a fight, isn’t it?” Diem observed without a trace of cheerfulness.

“I don’t know about that, Captain, but you have my thanks for your timely assistance.”

“No thanks necessary, Highness,” Diem replied as he pulled a thin flask from underneath a gauntlet.

He never met Iroh’s eyes, instead looking past him to the horizon. The Crown Prince recognized this as “the thousand yard stare”, a look shared by all those who had seen the worst combat.

A stone projectile landed between them, exploded into dust and showered them in fragments. Iroh brushed himself off. Diem ignored both the shower of stone and his commanding officer, instead opening the flask and taking a long pull.

Iroh drew breath to comment, but the final collapse of one of the burning towers drowned him out. A quick survey of the clearing told Iroh that this battle was over. A few dozen Earth Kingdom defenders, all of them artillery operators, had surrendered and been rounded up by Fire Nation troops.

“Not to worry, General,” Diem assured without looking at his superior, “I know what to do.”

He replaced the flask under the forearm of his gauntlet and marched towards the prisoners, his detachment in tow. The remains of the siege engines continued to burn, sending huge columns of black, oily smoke into the morning sky.
A small troop of Fire Nation soldiers entered the clearing from a path that lead around the hillside. Several smaller trails of smoke rose into the sky from behind the hill. At their head was Captain Mongke, a wide and feral grin on his face.

“Hail, General Iroh!” he saluted, “We just torched three smaller catapults on the north ridge.”

“Well done, Captain,” Iroh beamed, returning the salute, “You have done your part and we have done ours.”

“Yes, General,” the severe looking officer agreed, “All in all a good days work.”

“It’s not over yet,” Iroh observed, “What happened to the outlander?”

“He did his part too, then he was gone.”

Behind them Iroh could hear orders shouted at the Earth Kingdom prisoners.

“Gone?”

“Yes, he disappeared the moment we set off the charges.”

“Strange.”

Mongke snorted and nodded his head.

“General, I’ve been on campaign for nine seasons, been all over this savage continent, and I’ve met a lot of weird people, but that one might just be the strangest.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Nothing. Not a word after we left. He set the charges, killed half a dozen dirt slingers with those weapons of his, and then disappeared right when I lit off the ‘works.”

Iroh rubbed his chin, lost in thought.

“He’s long gone, General,” Mongke asserted, “and we’ve got a much bigger problem. Earthie cavalry is right on our heels! They’ll be here in a few minutes at most!”

The sound of firebending behind them caused Iroh to whirl around and step to Mongke’s side. The green clad prisoners screamed in agony as they burned alive, surrounded by Diem and his men. They remained frozen in the bending stances they had just used to deliver death to the captives.

One prisoner, clutching her face as her skin melted off her bones, staggered over to the captain who promptly kicked the dying woman’s legs out from underneath her. He stepped back as she crumpled to the ground, dead.

The stench from the burning bodies was unbearable. Diem regarded them with an expression every bit as inscrutable as his masked companions.

Iroh and Mongke approached the young captain. How many times had he done something like this in these last months?

“Regrettable, but necessary, Captain,” Iroh finally remarked in a retrospect voice, “You have learned a bitter lesson.”

“Yes, I have learned, General, I have learned everything I need to know to serve the Fire Lord and
the Fire Nation with honor,” Diem replied, still swaying slightly, his eyes fixed on the burning corpses, “I attended the University of Nomura and graduated… with honors… at Lake Myojin.”

A Myojin veteran. That explained it. The survivors were all scarred, including Nikon and Chieng. Many had turned hard and implacable, their expressions frozen in vacant, yet stony visages of dull hatred. Some, like Diem, had turned to drink. Some had killed themselves, as Nikon had intended, or drank cactus juice in the desert. All had acquired the “thousand yard stare.”

Diem pulled out his flask once again and took a drink. He saluted once more without looking at Azulon’s son or acknowledging his colleague.

“Companies!” the Myojin veteran roared suddenly, replacing the cap on his flask, “Fall in!”

The captives were dead. There was nothing left to contain. Ignoring the stench of burning bodies and murder, hundreds of masked soldiers fell into parade formation. Diem began to shout orders in preparation for the incoming cavalry attack.

“That one’s broken, General,” Mongke observed quietly, his arms crossed.

“Maybe we all are, Captain.”

“Ha! I’m not broken, your Highness,” Mongke retorted with scorn, “My comrades and I have no regrets.”

Iroh met Mongke’s hard eyes and cocked an eyebrow.

“Yes, Captain, I can see that.”

The conversation ended as the ground began to tremble with the approach of thousands of hooves.

Iroh was filthy and exhausted. Another day of combat had passed and it was now late evening. He stood at the head of the operations table on the bridge of the Constellation, his hands propping up his upper body. The elder “map buddy” directed two younger staff members to add markers to the appropriate places on the map to represent newly identified enemy units.

The front lines had barely shifted from the morning of the first day of the battle. The gains made late the night before had been forced from them the following morning by Colonel Jenju’s cavalry. The Earth Kingdom’s final charge had only been broken by Constellation’s mighty siphons and more than one discharge of lightning from Iroh’s own hands. Still, the enemy artillery had been smashed with very few casualties and now only their strongest earthbenders could reach the Fire Nation lines with their stones.

After almost two days of fighting, however, Azulon’s son was not alone in his exhaustion. Soundly defeated in their initial encounter with Jenju’s First Corps, the thin, ragged lines of Agni’s warriors staved off defeat with raw willpower alone. The destruction of the massive artillery pieces had raised a cheer up and down the line, but every soldier knew their only hope of survival lay with the rest of the army. They huddled amidst the wreckage of Mequon’s outer wall and braced for the next attack.

Iroh shared his men’s anxiety. Their own predicament barely registered in his mind. He was consumed with doubt and worry over his friends.

What was happening to the east?
The uncertainty had begun to grate on him almost as soon as Tien Shin’s Second Corps had disappeared from sight two days before. What had begun as a niggling worry had ballooned into almost a full on panic. Dimly he remembered the agony of waiting for the all but certain news of his cousin’s death to reach him while camped on the edge of the Nasu Plain. The present situation was only slightly more bearable because of the long hours of intense combat which temporarily relieved him of his burden.

It was the lulls he hated most. His body was almost at the point of collapse, but he could not sleep. He stared at the map, willing it to magically reveal the truth of his friend’s fates. The chart stubbornly refused to reveal anything beyond what he already knew of his own position.

He heard footsteps behind him.

“Have we received no word from the east then, your Highness?”

The question, clear as a bell and sudden as an avalanche, startled Iroh. He whirled, suddenly wide awake.

The governor of Mequon stood before him, her white kimono replaced by a soldier’s tunic and a red steel breastplate emblazoned with a phoenix. She wore a carefully knotted purple sash about her waist, and her hair was gathered underneath a helmet, plumed with gold feathers in recognition of her office.

She wore a belt and bore a skin of water and in her hand lay a scroll tube. She carried no obvious weapons.

“Rhiannon!” he exclaimed and embraced her, “I’m sorry, I stink horribly,” he admitted as he clutched her.

“You’re excused,” she offered magnanimously, hugging him back.

He released her and met her eyes with a worried expression.

“What are you doing here!? You must go back to the citadel!”

Her countenance hardened.

“No, Iroh, I won’t. I have brought the last of the garrison with me. We will face the end of your gambit together. If you fail, how long do you think I will survive locked up in my tower?”

The question hung ominously between them. He glanced briefly out the observation window to see hundreds of soldiers in colonial uniforms entering the clearing.

She turned and addressed the elder “map buddy.”

“I have brought the Second Brigade of the 27th Division for deployment, Lieutenant. Please assign us a place on the line.”

The old soldier regarded her gravely before bowing.

She turned back to her friend and continued.

“Gan, Nikon, your Chieng, and even that… filthy reptile, Tien Shin, all fight to protect this city. I myself have sent, no matter the lies we told ourselves in council, Colonel Zhou and the First Brigade of my garrison on a suicide mission to protect this city.”
Iroh looked down. After a day of unremitting horror, he could not look at his friend and lie.

“Will you deny me then the right to fight at your side for the sake of the city your glorious Father entrusted me to govern?”

The room became still as the younger adjutants stopped to eavesdrop on the general and his childhood friend.

“No,” Azulon’s son finally replied, “I won’t.”

He hugged her once again, this time in resignation.

“You are strong and brave, Rhiannon… and I’m glad you’re here.”

“I know.”

He released her once more and squared his shoulders.

“No, there has been no word from the east, the outcome still in doubt, but we’re not giving up and we’re not giving in, I swear it.”

She regarded him closely. His eyes burned with the Will of Fire and she could feel his determination. He had risked everything on the most daring enterprise in the history of the Fire Nation. Her heart swelled with pride. Powerless despite her enormous gifts, she had lost her father. She had lost Xian. But today… today she was not powerless and she would not lose Iroh.

“No, your Highness,” she replied, “We will not give up or give in, and for your faith and courage in this hour I bring you the message for which we have all hoped. I pray it contains the news you seek.”

She held forth the scroll tube, long and thin, it was made of the lightest wood for the longest ranged messenger hawks.

“Thunder only happens when it’s raining, Iroh,” she remarked mysteriously, “Take it.”

Iroh recognized the seal, took a deep breath, and took it. He read in silence, then his head snapped up to meet his friend’s expectant gaze.

“Agni Almighty,” he vowed, “We have a chance
Heart of Darkness

Chapter Summary

Tien Shin closes the trap at the Field of Coins... and the dinner party audience reacts.

The green clad soldier, disciplined and careful, swung deftly at the opening Tien Shin had provided. The elder prince instantly brought down a closed war fan on the man’s arm and was rewarded with the sharp crack of bone even through the protection of a well-wrought gauntlet. His off-hand fan swung wide and impacted on the side of his opponent’s visor, knocking it clean off.

Steely gray eyes met the former daimyo’s intense brown orbs. His opponent, in an amazing display of skill and willpower, threw the round shield he held in his undamaged hand, forcing the Fire Nation prince to waste a move parrying the blow. He easily knocked the shield out of the way, but the Earth Kingdom defender now brandished the sword in his left hand. His right arm was now useless, but if he was in pain, the green clad soldier did not show it.

Spinning rapidly, Tien Shin’s opponent pulled two large stones out of the earth and kicked them at his enemy. Too large to deflect with his fans, Tien Shin barely leapt out of the way, landing in a classic firebending stance. After a split second to master his breath and close his tessen so that the knuckles of each hand were exposed, he launched two plumes of bright orange fire, one of which caught his opponent on the shoulder above his wounded arm. The man staggered, but refused to fall.

Tien Shin knew he would win this fight, but he had been forced to privately acknowledge the mettle of his opponents. Like their element, stalwart and enduring, they fought to the death.

“Won’t these filthy savages ever give up?”

The question rose unbidden for only an instant, flashing across his mind like a shooting star. He suppressed it for a host of reasons he had neither the time nor the desire to analyze.

Fire was superior and victory for the Fire Lord was all that mattered.

Tien Shin sidestepped to the left, his opponent quickly matching his rotation by stepping to the right. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a red clad figure wielding a long spear, one of his own bodyguards, dart between him and his prey. There was no chance to get him out of the way; he would just have to make use of the intervention. The Earth Kingdom soldier reversed course and swung his blade, striking the Fire Nation guard between the shoulders blades as he passed. The guard, overextended, took the blow and fell to the ground.

The elder prince, seeing his opportunity, lunged forward. His opponent, moving to eliminate the guard while he was down, used his sword arm to launch one of the stones Tien Shin had avoided at his prostrate opponent’s head. Tien Shin stepped over his would be protector’s body and in a move so fast the Earth Kingdom soldier never even saw it, unfurled the war fan in his right hand and sliced his opponent’s neck wide open.

Blood spurted over the Corps Commander’s breastplate. He landed a flaming kick to the dying soldier’s torso as the stone he had launched landed on the bodyguard’s head with a sickening crunch.
Moments later he was alone.

Around him the battle continued to rage. Tien Shin’s Second Corps had taken the fight directly to the remains of Liu’s own Second Corps after the devastation wrought by the Inferno and the Firestorm. Disoriented, badly wounded, and blinded by smoke, the Earth Kingdom forces had been badly outmatched. The fighting here was almost over.

Tien Shin turned to see he had an audience. Commander Tojo, flanked by a pair of soldiers, had just arrived.

“Greetings, your Highness,” he saluted.

“Tojo,” he acknowledged.

“We have a victory, Highness,” the older man observed, sweeping the battlefield before them with his eyes.

“Yes, we do, Commander, and I assume the fighting in your assigned sector is concluded in our favor or else you would not be here?”

Suddenly nervous, Tojo replied, “Yes, sir, and to bring you this.”

A scroll exchanged hands. Tien Shin scanned it quickly then looked up to survey his surroundings once again. They stood in the shallow depression between two low rises and could see little beyond them.

“Come with me,” he commanded.

Within moments they crested the nearest hill. The smoke and haze from the rocket attacks had largely dissipated. He produced his sight glass from his gauntlet. He looked to the northeast, but could not make anything out. Beside him Tojo did the same.

“See anything, Commander?”

“No, sir, no enemy at any rate, but there’s the Inferno…” he responded, pointing to the east as he looked through his own instrument, “and that must be Nova behind her.”

“Makes sense since they sent the message.”

“Vyazma must be a little too far away for us to see.”

Tien Shin considered the situation. Nifong must aware by this time that unexpected combat had been joined with a new Fire Nation force and was moving to support his beleaguered Second Corps. He might not know that his Second Corps had been destroyed. So much the better.

“We’re finished here, Commander. Time to move. We have to complete the secondary envelopment as planned before Nifong does the same to us.”

“If my idiot “brother” hasn’t been handed his head by Jenju, that is,” he thought with decidedly mixed emotions.

“Yes, your Highness, do you want my division on the right then?”

Tojo had just made the politically correct move of offering himself for the most dangerous role. As his outfit wheeled to its left to pick up the Silk Road, his right would be exposed to the vanguard of Nifong’s Third Corps.
Tien Shin pursed his lips in thought.

“No, Commander, I will lead the right and I will issue orders for immediate departure. Don’t bother with the dead or the wounded. Anyone who can’t keep up will be left behind.”

Tojo opened his mouth to reply, but then, thinking better of it, shut it with an audible click.

Tien Shin felt the hesitation and turned to his subordinate. A knowing smile spread across his sharp features.

“There is one rule out here, Commander. Just one. Remember it well. Win. Win and they will forgive you anything.”

Tojo saluted and left.

The audience, quiet for much of the tale and ebullient during the description of Lake Myojin, had begun to heckle the storyteller during his graphic description of the rocket attack, the execution of the prisoners and the elder prince’s actions.

“Murderers!” spat more than a few, their eyes aflame.

“They don’t even honor their own dead!” shouted one.

“And they call us savages!” remonstrated another.

“Death to the Fire Nation!” chanted others as if reciting a mantra.

In the Fire Nation such conduct at a performance was simply unheard of, particularly amongst the nobility, and would result in the reprobate’s instant banishment from polite society. Such an offense in the Fire Lord’s presence would almost certainly result in far worse, but indeed Iroh could not recall such an event ever happening. Such behavior was simply beyond the imagining of a people steeped in hierarchy, the necessity of proper manners to avoid offense, and the iron discipline to control the most dangerous of elements at all levels of society.

Iroh registered the impropriety and sensed Zuko’s predictable reaction. He could feel his nephew’s tension. His body was stiff, the muscles in his hands, now curled into fists, taut. Anger seethed and bubbled in his eyes, almost certainly due to the dishonorable accusations rather than the barbaric catcalls made during a performance. He hoped the other guests would mistakenly assume the scarred young man’s anger was directed at the Fire Nation. This would only be natural, he knew, given the vivid and damning description of his and his friend’s actions in those heady days. Yet unlike his nephew, Iroh was by no means certain the audience was wrong.

Gao paused, sensing that he had lost control of the crowd. He broke his pose, an imperious stance he used to mimic the image of Tien Shin giving orders to his subordinate. Gesturing now to the guests, he addressed them as if they were fellow council members deciding great matters of state.

“Yes, my friends, it is true,” he agreed, nodding his head in a gesture of admission, “Prince Tien Shin is the very distillation of the evil essence of our enemies, but he is destined, as you shall see, to a most fitting and inglorious end.”

“To hell with the accountant too!” roared a fat man with a grey beard several tables down.
“How can they do these things!” a pretty young woman from one of the tables catty cornered with the head table asked, clutching her husband, “They’re murderers!”

“Iroh’s no better than Tien Shin!” yelled another.

Zuko, his countenance stony, risked a glance at his guardian. Iroh looked down at the floor in front of the table, his eyes glassy, his features impassive. He had no visible reaction to the last accusation, but the banished prince sensed it found its unintentional mark nonetheless.

“I agree,” Governor Tao asserted with a dismissive wave of his hand, “Iroh and his friends are no better than this vile Tien Shin creature!”

“Oh come now,” the merchant of Shanxi wheedled, adopting his most reasonable tone, “You see no difference at all between them?”

“No,” Tao replied sternly, “I don’t, Trimazu, they both sacrificed the lives of their own people as if they were nothing, murder prisoners without remorse, and commit atrocities with awful weapons mankind has no business wielding.”

“That may be so, my friend,” the fat man replied with an agreeable laugh and a contrarian tone, “but Iroh marched with the common soldiers in the desert, fought as hard as any man when the defense of his headquarters seemed all but hopeless, and, at least according to Gao here, displays a concern for humanity that Tien Shin does not.”

“Trust you to fall for that egalitarian twaddle, Trimazu,” Chen Ho injected venomously, “First you weep for a fascist villain and now you’ve fallen in love with the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation! Unbelievable, even for you.”

Chen Ho punctuated his verdict by draining his wine glass once again. He had long since achieved a free flowing, languid stupor that allowed him to comment on the asinine proceedings without becoming captive to it. No matter what barbarity Trimazu subjected his audience to, he would maintain the dignity and honor of the Ho family. He wiped the ends of his long, grey mustache with his napkin and turned to the aged yarn spinner.

“You spin a good tale Master Storyteller, I grant you,” admitted the fat merchant’s surly neighbor, “but it would be vastly improved if all the fascist scum died!”

“I’ll settle for the truth, Lord Ho,” the governor disagreed, inadvertently stifling a heated reply from Zuko, and, turning back to Gao continued, “I can only hope our raconteur understands if an educated audience scoffs at his attempt to draw some bogus distinction between these Fire Nation criminals!”

Zuko’s mind swirled with anger and shame. Anger at his uncle for not telling him any of this, anger at this gang of green-clad apes who refused to acknowledge their betters, shame at Xian’s defeat, and shame that he could not speak in this place in answer to the dishonorable charges laid against the Fire Nation and his family.

He didn’t even realize he’d stood up. Suddenly all eyes turned to him, Tao’s with equanimity, Trimazu’s with surprise, and Chen Ho’s as if he were observing an insect.

Zuko looked down, his arms were partially raised, his fists already balled. He was no more than a second from wreathing his hands fire… and that, he suddenly realized, would be the end of the story.

Strangely enough, that very thought prompted the banished prince to hesitate. What happened at Mequon and how did his uncle prevail? He of course knew of the famous victory and had studied the tactics, but this sterile knowledge paled in comparison to the living story unfolding before him.
like a sail on a sun lit sea. Who was this mysterious Rhiannon? He knew her family’s name, but not hers. What were the fates of Nikon and Chieng? The latter couldn’t have been Lu-Ten’s mother, could it? That had been Aunt Ten-Ten, though she had died when he was very young and Zuko remembered little about her. He knew of Prince Tien Shin, one of the few characters in the story he had heard of before this night, and he knew of the duel, but he did not know it had been with his uncle.

In a night full of surprises this last fact had come as no surprise to him. Much of the dark side of his family’s history, and so much of it was dark, was shrouded in silence, as he knew all too well from his mother’s disappearance.

As he stood before this audience of green-clad barbarians, he found he wanted answers to these questions as much or more than he wanted to exact revenge on them for their insults. The hesitation saved them both.

Iroh suddenly stood up and stretched.

“Excellent idea, nephew, we should make use of this break to visit the rest room.”

The retired general looked over to the master of the house.

“Generous lord, may we have your permission to withdraw for a moment before the story continues?”

Trimazu smiled, turned slightly and snapped his fingers. A servant appeared instantly.

“Yes, your Rotundity?”

“Show young Li here to the facilities, and make sure to highlight the tile and the glazing!”

The servant moved to lead Zuko away. Iroh looked slightly confused.

“And the toilet seats! Don’t forget the toilet seats! Twelve hundred gold a piece! I have the receipts!”

“Iroh, Lord,” Iroh interrupted, “May I join them? I too…”

Zuko’s guardian crossed his legs tightly indicating his most pressing need.

The bloated merchant’s smile grew wider. He waved Iroh back down to his seat with a jewel festooned hand.

“First thing’s first, Xian, sit back down for just a moment. You have provided the most wisdom tonight by far, an impressive feat for a street vendor if I do say so myself, though you know as well as I that merchants must be far wiser than they appear if they intend to stay in business!”

Trimazu’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

Iroh hesitated a moment then nodded once to his nephew before taking his seat once more. He heard Zuko and the servant’s footsteps fade behind him.

He looked on his host with a blank expression. Iroh was already emotionally exhausted, and though he of course knew the rest of the story, he dreaded hearing any more. Yet, he knew it was unavoidable.

“Lord, what do you want from me?”
“Oh, don’t worry, he’ll tell you, little man,” Chen Ho supplied acidly from his right.

Iroh ignored him, his gaze fixed on his obese host.

Trimazu eyed his guest, his free hand playing over the lip of his goblet, a knowing smile wide on his generous lips.

“Why, only to weigh in on this most interesting debate, my friend, and since you are one of the few here who rival me in stature,” he added with a pat on his ponderous paunch, “I want to know what difference you think there is between Iroh and Tien Shin?”

Iroh sighed almost imperceptibly and tried to collect his thoughts before making reply.

“Casting about for support from day laborers now?” Chen Ho observed casually during the pause, “But of course, that’s entirely fitting.”

As Iroh had, the master of the house ignored his neighbor, keeping his eyes on the retired general.

“Oh, don’t be silly Trimazu,” the governor butted in, “This freedman has travelled the continent and has no doubt seen Fire Nation atrocities up close. Is that not so, Xian?”

“I have seen atrocities, Governor… many,” Iroh answered dully.

The flames of Nomura filled his mind once more, followed swiftly by the screams of Diem’s dying prisoners, the blasted surface of the Field of Coins, and many other horrors yet to come. He squeezed his eyes shut, and some of the faces of nearby guests showed sympathy for what they assumed were very different memories.

“Then you cannot fail to agree with me. I mean, what difference does it make whether the face of your executioner is kind or not?”

How many times over the ceaseless passage of years had he punished himself with these very questions? Was he no better than Tien Shin? Were he and his friends murderers? Could he have done better? Could he have prevented Lu-Ten’s death if he’d gone a different path? There were never any answers… only the grief, the shame, the memory of anger long since shed… and a heart of darkness.

“No, Governor,” Iroh finally replied, his voice weary, “No difference that I can tell.”

“So,” the fat man mused, his tone soft as if he were not entirely convinced, “You believe Iroh and Tien Shin are cut from the same cloth too, eh? No difference?”

“Well, from… our… perspective, no.”

“Our?” the obese man queried, obviously intrigued.

“The Earth Kingdom.”

“And excellent distinction, Xian!” Trimazu congratulated with a slap on his thunderous thigh.

“Really? What other perspective is there?” Chen Ho drawled.

“The… enemy’s, I suppose,” Iroh replied somberly.

“Of course,” the corpulent merchant added, cocking his head to one side, “We can thank the Earth Spirit there are no fascists here tonight to appreciate such a distinction…”
“Lord Ho is right, Trimazu” Governor Tao injected, “I don’t see why the qualification deserves any praise. The bottom line is the Fire Nation thugs are all just a bunch of murdering thieves who are guilty of every crime known to man.”

“That still seems harsh, Tao,” Trimazu cajoled, “After all, in the defense of our country we have done the same to them and probably worse, I daresay! And who here would condemn the actions we have taken to defend our land, our families and our honor? Nifong himself sacrificed thousands of his own soldiers in the uncertain hope that he would learn something of value, then took advantage of a defenseless enemy to secure his complete destruction and took no prisoners when he did it. Shall we condemn him? Hmmm? Anyone?”

No one responded.

“Of course not!” the Merchant of Shanxi concluded with complete confidence, “He is a hero worthy in every way admiration, but still, does it follow that the title of “defender” indemnifies all of one’s acts, mmm? By the same token is the aggressor incapable of doing any good?”

Tao Lin sighed and waved the obese merchant off.

“I don’t know, Trimazu, and I see no practical value in those questions. We fight to defend our lands by any means necessary against an aggressor who, even in an embellished tale such as this, shows themselves to be cruel and inhuman.”

“By any means necessary?” the Merchant of Shanxi questioned, his jocular demeanor pierced for the moment, “I shudder, Governor Tao, to think that we may have become the very enemy we have beheld.”

Tao made a noise of disgust.

“Lord Ho is right, Trimazu,” he retorted stiffly, “You are no patriot and I have no interest in discussing this any further with you.”

Chen Ho responded to this with a low, cruel laugh.

“Why do you fall for this every time, Tao?” Chen Ho injected, “You say you have no interest in Trimazu’s ridiculous sophistry, but you never fail to provide him the opportunity to force the rest of us to listen to it. You’ll pardon me if I have no sympathy for your predicament. He doesn’t believe most of what he says.”

“I preferred it when he was trying to fart on me,” the Governor confessed.

“That can be arranged, my friend!” the fat man promised, before his booming laughter once again echoed throughout the hall, “I feel the dessert loosening my bowels even as we speak!”

Gao, who had taken the opportunity to visit the restroom himself, returned with Zuko in tow.

“But Master Trimazu,” the old storyteller injected smoothly, concealing his desperate desire to avoid another scatological disaster, “the evening ebbs swiftly, and if your guests are to be home before sunrise we must continue the tale presently.”

The banished prince took his seat next to his uncle once more.

“Of course, Master Storyteller,” Trimazu boomed in agreement, “by all means continue!”

“Did I miss anything, uncle?” Zuko asked under his breath.
“No, nothing important.”

Zuko suspected this wasn’t true, but couldn’t press his guardian further in this exposed venue.

The miserable baboon’s restrooms had indeed been impressive, even approaching the scale of the Fire Lord’s palace, but the banished prince had ignored the glazing, mosaics and gold toilet seats. He tried desperately to remember all the different threads of the story, and question after question cascaded through his mind while he used the facilities. They would almost certainly have to wait until the next day. For now, all he could hope was that some would be answered by the storyteller himself.

Iroh got up and, to his great relief, successfully excused himself to inspect the merchant’s expensive glazing.

“Yes,” Tao added in grudging agreement with the merchant’s instruction, “I suppose it’s time to pay for Lake Myojin, so let’s get on with it.”

The audience was still abuzz with dozens of separate conversations. Though the shouts and slogans had ceased, the guests were still clearly angered by the latest events in the tale.

Gao’s eyes swept the room before turning back to the master of the house.

“Give me your peace, generous Lord, and I will gladly give you mine!”

The obese mischief maker laughed and motioned to a servant with a long staff who stood against the wall where Gao’s curule chair was kept. The servant banged the floor three times with his staff, ringing the banquet hall like a bell.

“Master Trimazu calls for silence!” the servant roared in a thunderous voice.

Seeing that the storyteller was ready to continue the audience complied.

“The noble Lord Governor speaks true. The time has come, esteemed guests, for the tragedy of Mequon to conclude… for now we will learn the final fate of Deng Zev Nifong and his gallant Army of the Granite Mountains… and Iroh shall come to know that great victories often demand the most awful sacrifices…”
Chieng and Gan face a horrible choice as they observe Nikon moving to attack the Earth Kingdom vanguard.

“It’s Corona, Captain,” the engineer reported from the driver’s seat of the Inferno.

Gan looked over his driver’s shoulder. They were rapidly closing on their sister dreadnought. She was not moving and as they drew closer it became clear she had tipped over. She lay at a drunken angle with her starboard side resting on the eroded face of a small hillock.

“Get up here, Tang!” the former Qu’ai Tau commanded.

Seconds later she appeared next to him. Tang leaned forward and grabbed a cleat on the upper instrument panel for support. She looked out the window and swore under her breath.

“They’ve blown a tread, Captain,” she reported.

He swore too. He knew what that meant from Tang’s expert briefings. The intense maintenance regimen for the tank trains required that the treads be disassembled, cleaned, oiled, tightened, worn locking pins replaced and then reassembled every two hundred leagues or so. A blown tread meant hours of delay and the possibility of damage to the road and drive wheels or, worse, the drive shafts and transmission.

It was now afternoon. The tank trains had crossed the Field of Coins without stopping to survey the damage they had done. Bodies, both enemy and Fire Nation, wounded and corpses, were run over indiscriminately. They had deviated from their course only to avoid impact craters.

They ran to escape the arrival of the enemy… and because they had an appointment to keep. Nifong’s arrival weighed heavily on the new captain, and not for his own sake. An awful decision loomed and he dreaded to make it alone. Now he wouldn’t have to.

“Kill drive engines,” he instructed the driver, “Pull us up alongside.”

The throb of the Inferno’s engines subsided as the driver disengaged the gears. Below them the boiler operators began to dump steam off the main header. The gauges on the dash registered the engineer’s actions. Corona and her train grew in their sight as they approached, their speed slowing noticeably.

Tang was correct. A group of technicians could now be seen working furiously around the rear portside tread. They flittered about like a hive of angry buzzard wasps. Moments later the Inferno came to rest next to her distressed sister.

Gan opened the door and hopped lightly into the wavy, knee high grass that covered much of the steppes. He heard Tang drop down behind him. Together they marched over to the site of the repair efforts.

The tread had been completely ripped off its wheels. Several of these were missing, including the
forward drive wheel that transferred power from the drive shaft to the tread. The track links lay in neat piles around them. Many were damaged. *Corona* had tipped over such that the remaining wheels of the blown tread were now about ten feet off the ground.

The engineers had constructed a wide, makeshift gantry to allow access. Chieng stood on top of the gantry with her chief boiler operator and a couple other technicians. Each of them worked quickly and expertly with a pile of tread links and locking pins to remanufacture the destroyed tread. While Gan watched Chieng picked up a large circular object wrapped in oil cloth. Moments later a new drive wheel emerged, its serrated gear teeth gleaming with the preservative in which it was stored.

“Had to break out the spare, Chieng?” Gan called out.

She fitted the gear in place before turning to her replacement captain.

“The old one’s on the ground there if you want it.”

They looked at the ground before them to see shattered metal fragments that could have been either pieces of wheel or tread. They were so mangled they were unidentifiable. There was no trace of the steel tread guard that normally covered much of the tread to protect it from attack.

“I’ll take your word for it. I’d ask what happened, but that seems fairly obvious.”

Gan swept the scene before him for emphasis. Huge wedges of stone lay strewn about the area as well as a dozen burnt Earth Kingdom corpses. The impact site, distinctive as a signature, lay clearly exposed on *Corona*’s hull above the blown track.

“Yes, they hit us with a coin,” she admitted with more than a trace of bitterness.

“How much longer? Nifong can’t be far away. We’ve got to keep moving.”

She turned back to her work and began quickly adding new links to the rapidly growing tread, expertly inserting new locking pins in place with audible clicks.

“About an hour, but this isn’t the problem.”

Gan’s heart sank, he knew what that meant.

“Drive shaft?”

She grunted approvingly, “Tang has done her job well, I see.”

“Oh yes, Commander!” Tang chirped from Gan’s side, “I was worried when you said the Ministry is full of nothing but idiots, but Captain Shu really is a quick study!”

He turned to look at his Chief Boiler Operator in her dirty maroon coveralls. She smiled back at him, her dark curls framing her face, enthusiastic as ever and genuinely happy. He could hardly damn her for that.

“Yes, that’s not surprising,” the curt engineer observed without any trace of embarrassment at the revelation of her impropriety, then turning from her work to address the former Qu’ai Tau she continued, “You did well on the Field of Coins. I was right to give you the *Inferno*. Did you get your money’s worth then?”

Gan started slightly. He hadn’t thought about the money since Mequon. Now that he had seen the effect he found the question disgusting, but had he not introduced it? He felt ashamed.
He made eye contact with Tang, who regarded him serenely, before replying.

“Ask me after we win,” he finally equivocated, before mounting the gantry.

He walked across the platform, Tang once again in tow. He sat next to Chieng and began making tread out of links exactly as Chieng had done. The engineer looked over. He was slower than she, but he gained speed and accuracy even as she watched.

“You were wrong, you know,” she observed quietly, “You are a natural born dreadnought captain.”

Tang looked away to hide the wide smile she couldn’t suppress. It was the highest praise Chieng could offer.

“We need to get out of here fast,” he answered, so embarrassed at the compliment that he failed to register her declaration of his fallibility, “Inferno can tow her as soon as we get the tread repaired. We can worry about the drive shaft later.”

They worked furiously in silence for a little while. As the tread neared completion Chieng stood up.

“Tang and the others can finish this. Let’s get a look from up top.”

She dismounted the gantry in one swift motion. Gan climbed back down the way he came. Soon they stood on the roof of the Inferno. They swept the horizons with their sight glasses.

The survey did not take long.

Gan stared in horror through his instrument, his hands trembling so badly that he could barely focus on what he was seeing.

The Silk Road lay several miles to the south. They could see it clearly with the unaided eye. It ran straight and wide, a white ribbon in the sunlight, from the southwest to the northeast in the direction of Vyazma. Near the horizon they could see where the Silk Road was crossed by the smaller Hue Road. This did not concern him. What lay beyond the crossroads did.

Over the eastern horizon he could see the dust trails of thousands of hooves waft high into the sky. The main body of the Army of the Granite Mountains could not yet be seen, but its arrival could be no more than a few hours away. Several leagues to their southeast, however, hundreds of tiny dust trails clearly showed the daimyo’s position… and his intent.

Nikon’s armor had obviously used the Hue Road to protect Tien Shin’s right flank, but now, they too had seen Nifong’s dust trail. Abandoning the Hue Road, they now cut north along the open steppe, hoping to drive into the Earth Kingdom’s exposed left flank.

“He’s moving to attack them! Agni damn the idiot!”

He took a deep breath, the resolve instantly hardening within him.

“We have to help him!” Gan vowed, then pointing at an area of high ground several leagues to their northeast, “We can use that ridge line, fire a set, pack up and move just like…”

He was stopped mid-sentence by a hand on his shoulder. Gan’s heart froze. He was panicking and he knew it. Chieng’s touch was firm, but gentle, and carried with it the stroke of doom. Her touch communicated more than any words ever could.

They stood in silence for a heartbeat before Gan spoke in a low voice.
“He’ll die without our help. They all will.”

She looked at the ground, her eyes squeezed shut. Her nails began to dig into his shoulder.

“I know.”

He looked to the west where Tien Shin’s infantry were moving at speed along the Silk Road towards Mequon.

“Why… why not?” he asked, his voice quiet and tense, “Why do we have to let our friend die when we could help him?”

Her hand became a claw. He felt pain, but he did not react.

She answered slowly and deliberately, reluctantly forcing out the bitter words.

“If we go to him now, yes… we might be able to help him… but if we do, we will lose this battle and Mequon will fall.”

She was right. The dust cloud on the eastern horizon had grown impossibly high. Nikon’s forces were brave and battle hardened, but few. The situation was clear, the conclusion obvious and inescapable.

“If we lose, Nikon will die anyway, won’t he?”

“Yes, his only hope… and ours… is to do what we promised.”

“So… we have to let him die… in order to save him? Is that it?” he concluded in a tone of disbelief.

The curt engineer released her iron grip and looked down at the sloped metal roof on which they stood.

“His life is not ours to save today.”

They both struggled in silence, the implication of their decision crushing them. Both replayed the chain of events on the Nasu, for the situation had been the same. In both instances Iroh and Nikon had needed their help, and both times they could choose only one. Their decision today would be the same. The difference this time was that Nikon had committed no error and was in fact moving at great risk to himself and his men to give the Army of the Great Divide its greatest chance of victory. For this daring he would face the entire might of the Army of the Granite Mountains alone.

“We have to do this… don’t we?”

Chieng nodded once. She looked up to regard the growing dust cloud on the horizon. Her posture was perfect, her countenance hard, she might have been a statue.

“Yes… either we help Iroh and Tien Shin destroy Jenju… or Nifong and Jenju will smash Tien Shin… and us… between them.”

“Nikon is buying us time then… with his life.”

Chieng shook slightly at this. Gan reached out and took her hands in his. She squeezed them hard and he reciprocated.

“Yes,” she admitted.
“And we… we have to let him.”

“Yes,” she replied, her voice finally catching, “It is the price of victory.”

They held hands tightly for another moment before releasing each other.

The decision made, she looked up to meet her friend’s grey, unflinching eyes. Neither of them could believe what they were about to do, but do it they would.

“Prepare for departure, Captain, we continue as planned.”

It was now late afternoon. The morning had seen some of the bloodiest fighting of the whole campaign and in the pale morning light Nikon had seen devastation wreaked on the bodies of soldiers that cried out to the universe for justice. Myojin had drowned men and crushed their bodies with the power of water, but it was fire, unlike any had ever seen, that reigned supreme over the dreaded Field of Coins.

They had retreated north and west as soon as the armor column had received Gan and Chieng’s frantically relayed messages of Nifong’s arrival.

Now Nikon and Jin watched as the tank trains on the horizon disappeared to the northwest leaving behind only dust and scarred earth.

“So that’s it, isn’t it?” the tank driver asked dully. He had opened the hatch above the driver’s seat and his head popped out of the opening like some grim singing groundhog.

An identical hatch to his right opened with a clang to reveal the pretty young gunner. After miraculously surviving Lake Myojin, the Ping Tou and the desert crossing, she had been promoted to bow gunner and assistant tank driver. She no longer looked young or scared. Her name was Leng, he had learned. She’d earned it.

“We’re on our own now, right, sir?” she asked evenly.

Nikon grunted.

The old crew was together again. Nikon had laughed when Jin had appeared at the east gate of Mequan and insisted he be Nikon’s driver. The young commoner didn’t know whether to hug the surly man for his willingness to court death with him once more, or burn him to a crisp for initially refusing General Iroh’s order to cross the desert. In the end Nikon settled for asking why he deserved the honor. Jin’s reply had been characteristically blunt.

“Because you need a driver… and I want to kill them… kill them all for what they did to us at Lake Myojin.”

He was nasty and a major pain in the ass, but he had the Will of Fire and that was enough.

Iroh’s friend had ordered a halt soon after they had left the Hue Road and began to drive across the open ground toward the dust cloud. He saw the tops of two leviathans, small in the distance, still and unmoving. While he watched their running lights sprang to life and they began to move, the rearmost flashing a signal to all who could interpret a one word command, “CONTINUE.” As the first two disappeared from sight, two more appeared, separated by a league or two. Ten minutes later these were gone as well.
Their fellow tanks had gathered about them and now sat idling. All of them had been painted with the emblem of Nikon’s original Fifth Brigade. Most of the tanks were bedecked with anywhere between five and ten infantry from Second Corps who had been assigned to support the tanks. A few were clearly colonial troops who had survived the trap. They waited for the daimyo to give the order to advance. All had seen the last of the tank trains, no doubt the Firestorm, disappear.

“We’re going to be in trouble, my lord, without the tank trains to cover us,” Jin offered bluntly.

Nikon couldn’t get used to being called “my lord”, though this of course was the proper address for the daimyo of a Fire Nation army. He felt the irresistible urge to look behind him every time he was addressed in this manner by someone from the ranks. Iroh’s friend had indeed risen high above his nominal station as a commoner, and if he survived the campaign he would have wealth and honor undreamed of in his youth.

The dust trails settled, leaving the western and northern horizons bleak, desolate panoramas. To the east, the dust cloud grew ever larger. A few low ridges were probably all that separated them from the bulk of the Earth Kingdom army.

As he surveyed the eastern horizon once more, he doubted whether he would survive to enjoy his ascendance.

No matter. He knew what he must do. The battlefield had resolved itself and it was plain as day to read.

“Yes, Jin, but we’re not here to stay out of trouble. We’re here to destroy the enemy.”

The daimyo climbed out of the machine and stood on the cupola. Around him the tank crews and their infantry passengers turned their attention in his direction. Most of the tankers wore goggles caked with dirt and dust. A few were bandaged, as tank commanders who were enthusiastic about firebending from the turret were favored targets of the enemy. Almost all were commoners. He knew how to speak to them. Naturally confident and charismatic, Nikon relished the opportunity to address his soldiers. It also helped him conceal his own panic before combat.

“We hit’em hard this morning, ladies!” the daimyo began, his voice strong and confident, “but we’re not finished yet.”

“No way, my lord, we still owe’em for Myojin!” yelled a tank commander from a few rows back in a brassy voice.

Her tank was marked Flaming Bitch in two bright red characters. He knew her as one of the few survivors from his original brigade. She leaned out over her turret, propping herself up on her elbows. He wondered at her loyalty after such a disaster, but he loved her all the more for it. The assembly roared approval at her bold pronouncement. Every fist was raised to the heavens in affirmation.

“Damn straight, Su Lin!” Nikon rejoined, instantly pointing a finger at the gung ho junior officer, “And this is payback, make no mistake about it!”

“Fifth Brigade!” she screamed in reply, saluting Nikon at the same time.

A few other soldiers, all Fifth Brigade survivors, wholeheartedly echoed the sentiment. Nikon threatened to well up at this display, but instead pressed on.

“You honor me,” he acknowledged with a brief dip of his head, “but this is not just Fifth Brigade’s fight! The Fire Lord himself has honored us with the glorious mission of destroying General Nifong,
and General Iroh has charged us with the sacred task of supporting the right flank of Second Corps and by Agni we’re going to do both!”

His audience murmured acknowledgment. Many faces showed worry and fear, but most showed enthusiasm and eagerness. These were the bitter veterans of Lake Myojin. Nikon was terrified in his mind, but his face and his heart reflected the determination and desire of his comrades.

“So what now, my lord? Why aren’t the tank trains attacking with us? And why’d we get off the Hue Road?” piped in an older tank driver from his left, from one of Tien Shin’s brigades.

“What now?” Nikon responded, addressing the tank driver’s first question with a raised eyebrow. He cocked a thumb over his shoulder and asked, “Do you see that?”

All eyes turned to the dust cloud to the east. The wind was still, so it rose in a massive hazy column towards the sun.

“That, my friends, is Deng Zev Nifong! You remember him, right? Deng the Hammer? The guy who let the snow savages do his dirty work for him at Myojin?”

Several bow gunner hatches popped open at this to reveal the firebenders who manned them. Tankers and infantry all looked at each other as they digested these questions. Several whistled and some shook their heads. Low conversations broke out all over the congregation.

“Excellent, my lord! We’ll attack then, right? Isn’t that the plan?” Su Lin injected after lifting her goggles to get a better view of the dust cloud and her commander.

“Yes, Sergeant, by Agni we will attack, but no, comrades, this wasn’t the plan.”

The disparate conversations ceased and all eyes turned once again to Nikon.

“No, we thought Nifong wouldn’t get here for another day at least,” he turned and looked over his shoulder, then back to his audience, “Guess we were wrong.”

“So what now, daimyo?” an infantryman shouted from far back.

“Well, folks, our options are to stick close to Second Corps’ flank and wait for Nifong’s cavalry to drive into us,” several boos and catcalls erupted at this, but Iroh’s friend plowed ahead, “or, we can leave the road as we’ve done and drive into his flank. Which do you think we’re gonna do?”

“Light’em up!” Su Lin yelled, raising her tiny fist into the air once more. She looked like an angry marionette, but her eyes burned with a fanatical light and Nikon shuddered to think of fighting her himself.

“Burn the sons of bitches!” yelled a young colonial soldier from his right, followed swiftly by a cacophony of agreement from the rest.

Nikon swept his gaze from one end of the line to the other. Not all of them were firebenders, but every one of the burned with the Will of Fire. They might die for the Fire Lord today, but the enemy would pay dearly for it.

As he looked into the faces around him, he remembered once more, as he had at several points over this seemingly endless campaign, how young and innocent they had looked when they had landed at Gela. Laughter, hope, pride, all these had been in abundant evidence. There were no smiles in the faces before him. No laughter. No pride. Not a clean uniform in sight. Now, every one of them was hard, frozen with anger, their eyes simultaneously far away yet bright with desire for battle.
They were going to die today. They knew it and they didn’t care.

Taken aback by the observation, he involuntarily paused for a moment of reflection.

Dear Agni, what’s happened to us?

Then he remembered Lake Myojin, and the destruction reeked on his comrades by Nifong and his pitiless army of green and blue clad murderers. Suddenly the faces before no longer seemed alien or scary. Anger surged within him and his fists burst into blue flame. In an instant, his face mirrored theirs.

“Yes, brothers and sisters!” the daimyo thundered, raising his fists to the sky once more, “We will burn them! Burn them to ashes! Agni as my witness, I swear to you Prince Xian and all who died with him at Myojin will be avenged!”

The whole column erupted in cheers and saluted. After a few moments Nikon motioned for silence, and to his surprise they quieted for him to speak. He doused his flames and raised his voice as loud he could.

“No, we can’t beat them ourselves, but we are going to attack! We must! We gotta stop Nifong from making contact with Second Corps before they have a chance to smash the dirties between them and General Iroh! We must do this, or the Fire Nation will lose the battle, Mequon will fall, and the war will be lost!”

He paused a moment to let this sink in. His words were relayed to the rear of the column by those in the front who heard clearly.

“If we succeed, General Iroh, Commander Shiung, and…” even now Nikon couldn’t bring himself to use the hated elder prince’s name, “Second Corps will smash the force attacking Mequon in time to face Nifong with everything we’ve got!”

He ruthlessly put down the sudden urge to acknowledge that even that might not be enough to guarantee victory. At best the odds would be even, for the Army of the Great Divide would be exhausted, whereas Nifong’s army would be relatively fresh.

Great Agni, he prayed, don’t let our fire go out for nothing.

“We must delay them. We must strike and withdraw, again and again, and if we are lucky they’ll follow. Target the earthebenders! Kill every damn last one of them you see!”

This was long a standing order, but he knew repetition never hurt. Benders were prime targets on all sides.

“Don’t let them get a chance to flip you over!” he continued in earnest, “The ground is dry, so if we keep moving we should be okay, but if you do get flipped, get out of your machine immediately and jump on a neighbor as fast as you can! You hear me?”

The soldiers murmured their assent. Every tanker present remembered the fate of those who stayed in their machines at the cursed lake.
“They’ll aim for the treads! If you lose a tread you’re going to get flipped! So don’t let them! Remember we are here to disrupt and delay – not to inflict losses! Above all we must… keep… moving, is that clear?”

His voice rang over their heads. They looked at him with feverish eyes.

“Then may Agni ride with us today and bring death to the enemy!”

Nikon brought his goggles down over his eyes and saluted. Without waiting to see his audience’s response, he dropped back down into the turret. He rapped his fist on the cupola where it made a hard clanking sound.

“C’mon, Jin, move us out.”

The Fury roared to life and lurched forward.
Chapter Summary

Colonel Fong faces the consequences of his actions and General NIfong makes a fateful decision.

The soldier was dying. Her face was horribly burned and she stunk of scorched flesh. Her chest armor had melted in places and sunk into her body. Nearby two of her companions had died before they had reached the column.

Desperate for news, Deng had decided to join the vanguard. On the way they had seen three riderless ostrich horses grazing less than a mile from the road and had gone to investigate. There they had found the two bodies, and albeit temporarily, the lone survivor who clung so tenuously to life at their feet.

Nifong knelt on the soft earth of the steppe that would soon be her grave. A breeze had sprung up and the grasses around them now waved gently. Around him were gathered his adjutant and several other members of his staff. Behind them the main body of the Army of the Granite Mountains flowed west along the Silk Road towards Mequon.

He held her hands in his. It was all he could do. His round helmet lay on the grass beside her. Nifong had removed it so that she could see her leader, but he feared the gesture was in vain.

“Sir,” she began again, for she had tried several times to speak through the agony, but failed, “they didn’t… they didn’t even give us a chance… to… to… they burned us… burned us alive…”

She looked up, but did not see him. Her pupils were unfocused, one dilated much wider than the other. She had the wide cheek bones and heavy set body of the hill tribes from the far north. So many like her had left their homes to fight thousands of miles from where they were born, never to return.

“From the sky… fire… from the sky...”

“Could you see them, soldier?” the young captain asked softly from her other side.

“Yes, from the east they came… tanks, sir, many tanks… and those… those things…”

The woman’s breathing had turned staccato and ragged.

NIfong’s heart dropped in his chest. He could guess what she meant.

“Dreadnoughts?” he asked.

“Yes, we saw… them… their shadows… on the horizon… when the sun came up…”

“Colonel Liu, is he…?” the adjutant prompted.

“Don’t know… no one knows… we couldn’t run… it was a trap… a trap…please…General, so… sorry…”
“Rest easy now, daughter,” Nifong soothed, stroking her filthy hair, “there is no shame.”

Then she was gone. One moment she was speaking, the next her jaw went slack, but her eyes had been lifeless from the moment they saw her and they betrayed no difference between life and death. The bodies of her companions lay still and silent around her.

Deng stood, his aide following. He widened his stance in preparation to bury the dead when three new riders appeared. They saluted and dismounted. One was a scout, another a messenger from Wu-Ti’s staff and the last was Colonel Fong.

“Sir,” began the messenger, his eyes wide with fear, “We’ve received some intelligence and Master Wu-Ti bade me bring it you immediately.”

Nifong felt the cold chill of fear tighten his chest. Wu-Ti delivered good news in person. Bad news was delivered by others. The situation was getting worse. He could feel it. Ever since the rains had begun in Ningbo the darkness had whistled through the hallways of his soul.

The scouts sent south and east had either returned with nothing to report or had not returned at all. The messengers sent west had not returned. The dead soldiers before them were the first word they had received from Liu or Jenju in more than a day. Perhaps most ominously of all, early reports of a Fire Nation withdrawal towards the Gulf of Gela had apparently proven false. A message had arrived the day before from the Council of Five that the Nasu had been almost completely liberated with no sign of Prince Iroh.

Doubt gnawed at the aging generals’ mind as they marched resolutely west, hoping to come upon Liu’s Second Corps. They had seen evidence of his passing and occupied Vyazma as he had without incident. Now, here on the Silk Road west of the town, they had come upon the first of the survivors of the Field of Coins.

Still, the bad news could wait.

“We honor the fallen first,” he admonished gently.

The soldiers, who had paid no heed to the corpses littering the ground, noticed them for the first time. Colonel Fong, his expression shocked, allowed a gasp to escape his lips at the sight of the hideously burned bodies. Sickened and ashamed, they lowered their heads in respect. Nifong’s staff joined them.

He offered a silent prayer and gently lowered each body into the embrace of their mother earth. They left no grave markers as they had at Cam’ron and other battles, for there was no wood. The memory of their lives in the minds of their loved ones would be the only proof that they had ever existed. Soon even that would be gone, for the lives of men are short.

The green clad general stood and turned to the newcomers. He motioned for them to report.

Fong stepped forward, his countenance stricken.

“General, I…”

Nifong cut him off abruptly with a sweep of his powerfully muscled hand.

“Not you, Colonel, you’re last.”

Ashamed, Fong closed his eyes and stepped back.
“Sir,” the messenger began again, “the vanguard reports stragglers just like these from Second Corps… most of them badly wounded. They all say the enemy hit them with some kind of new weapon!”

Nifong and his adjutant shared a glance.

“Describe it,” Iroh’s opponent commanded.

The messenger gave a quick description of the rocket sleds. The words, empty, vacuous symbols, paled in comparison to the charred faces of the soldiers they had just buried. None of them were innocent of the tragedies of war, but devastation reeked on the corpses they had just buried drove home to them just what the Fire Nation could and did do.

“Dear gods in heaven,” the adjutant breathed, “Have these people no pity? No mercy? Will they murder the whole world?”

“No, Captain, they have no mercy,” Nifong answered quietly, “but whether they murder the world or not is up to us.”

“But who are they and where did they come from? Was it the garrison?”

“I don’t think so, Captain,” the scout injected with a shake of his head, “I was with First Corps this morning. The lobster backs holding the city are Fire Nation regulars judging by their uniforms, though I’m pretty sure they had nothing to do with whatever happened to Second Corps.”

“Okay, what about Liu?” the aide asked in confusion and dawning horror, “Where is Second Corps now?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the scout replied, clearly in distress, “I expected to run into them not you… but… on the way here I saw another large enemy column, mostly infantry it looked like, moving north on the Hue-Dalian road. I was hoping to run into Colonel Liu’s outfit around there… instead I just saw the damn fire spitters.”

“How large? As big as the force holding Mequon?” the Captain asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a shake of his head, “but big, and I crossed some huge tracks heading northwest… the ground was all torn up… and after what I just heard I think it might have been from whatever they used to hit Second Corps.”

The scout, confused, turned to face Nifong.

“Sir, I don’t understand, the tracks looked just like the tracks from those massive metal things we destroyed at Myojin! How could they be here? We wiped them out, didn’t we!”

The green clad general did not respond. The scouts questions rang in his ears like thunder.

“Not all of them,” Nifong’s aide replied instead, “a few got away, but we chased them deep into the Ping Tou Mountains. It can’t be them. Look, forget about that, right now we have to make contact with Second Corps and find out what happened!”

“No need,” Nifong responded, for the evidence was clear, “Second Corps has been destroyed.”

The others looked at their commander, stupefied, their mouths hanging open.

“What else?” Nifong prompted after a pause to allow the news to sink in, his expression distant.
The scout shut his mouth with an audible click and produced a message from underneath his vambrace. He handed it to Nifong who took the scroll without opening it.

“Sir,” the scout began more formally than before, as if suddenly remembering his audience, “Colonel Jenju also bid me inform you that First Corps has met and defeated the Fire Nation force defending the outer wall of Mequon. She has placed the city under siege.”

“How strongly is the city held?”

“About three or four divisions.”

“Have we identified them?”

“No sir, they displayed no battle flags.”

Nifong grimaced.

“Prince Iroh?” his aide prompted.

The question hung between them. The aging general turned back to the scout.

“What was the situation when you left?”

“The artillery had reduced the outer wall, but a Fire Nation counter attack burned them down and destroyed them. The counter attack was repelled and the Colonel now asks for further orders.”

Nifong scanned the horizon to the west and south, his expression hollow.

“And what would you have said if you had come upon Colonel Liu, as you expected?”

“I was instructed to ask him to move with all due haste to support Colonel Jenju’s left flank. She hopes to roll up the Fire Nation’s exposed right. They don’t have enough men to extend their line to the river.”

Suddenly, as if the sun had suddenly risen in the middle of night, he saw the situation clearly. He turned sharply and focused his full attention on the scout.

“Has the enemy moving north on the Hue Road cut us off from Jenju?” he asked, unable to hide the intensity in his voice, “Can you get a message back to her?”

“I think I can get back to her, General, but I’m pretty sure the lobster backs I saw on the road will get to her before you do.”

Nifong looked at his aide, then at Fong, before addressing the rider once again. His speech, normally soft, measured and firm, came forth in a rapid stream.

“Go now! Tell Jenju she’s about to be enveloped – if she hasn’t figured it out already! She must abandon the siege and head northeast. She can use the Silk Road if its clear, but above all she has to avoid getting trapped between the two Fire Nation armies.”

The scout confirmed the orders with a dip of his head.

“What if they come in contact with the fire spitters coming up the Hue Road?” the young Captain asked breathlessly.

Nifong closed his eyes and took a deep breath to gather his thoughts. There was an opportunity here
to salvage victory from disaster… was he bold enough to take it? He knew the answer.

“Get out the maps.”

Moments later Nifong pored over a large document spread out on the grass. It was a highly detailed geologic survey chart from the library at Ba Sing Se University. The contours of the ground were clearly and expertly shown along with different colors that indicated the types and ages of the rocks exposed on the surface. The roads and towns were indicated in pencil and had clearly been added after the chart’s manufacture.

The area east of Mequon was distinguished by little, save the Silk and Hue Roads and the first of a series of low ridges which became progressively higher as one moved north. These latter heralded the border region between the steppes and the escarpment that marked the edge of the Dune Sea many leagues distant. Nestled amongst these progressively larger folds of earth the trading city of Dalian sat upon the same tributary of the Yangtze which flowed around the western wall of Mequon and was the termination point of the Hue Road.

Using a piece of charcoal, Nifong quickly began to make marks on the map.

“Here we are… and this is where Second Corps should have been, but where we now see enemy forces… and Jenju and her opponents are… here. Does that look about right?”

The scout and the messenger agreed.

“All right, then it’s clear. Jenju must pull out of her siege and march northeast, avoiding these ridges if possible. I bet that’s where the Fire Nation dreadnoughts went. Then, she is either to avoid combat entirely and try to rejoin us, or, if we time it correctly and her scouts sight us closing in on the right flank of enemy column moving north on the Hue Road, swing southeast and hit the enemy on their left.”

“Won’t the fire spitters holding Mequon follow First Corps, sir?” the scout prompted.

“Instruct her to raise every earthen and stone obstruction she can as she moves. Earthbend deep trenches as well in zig zag patterns. That will slow them down.”

“We’re going to keep moving then, General?” the aide broke in, “To try and trap the enemy between us and Colonel Jenju?”

“Yes, Captain,” Nifong confirmed, “They’ve already hurt us badly, but we have a chance to turn the tables on them. They’re overextended, and if it is Prince Iroh, they must be exhausted.”

“From what, sir?”

“From crossing the Dune Sea.”

The assemblage once again regarded their commander in shock. He might as well have suggested that they were under attack by aliens.

“That’s impossible,” Wu-Ti’s messenger finally said, completely forgetting the proper address.

“No, it’s not,” Nifong contradicted, “you yourself just delivered word that the Fire Nation has unleashed another dreadful weapon upon us, the evidence of which we just buried moments ago, and our scouts have seen the unmistakable sign of dreadnoughts. Further, we received word yesterday that Prince Iroh is nowhere to be found on the Nasu. So ask yourself, where did these “new” Fire Nation armies come from? Where did these dreadnoughts come from?”
No one answered. In the silence Nifong wondered, and not for the first time, whether he had chosen
the wrong man to target with Madame Wu so long ago. The thought of her stabbed him and he thrust
aside the mental image of the beautiful fortuneteller. He knew her first name, but he dared not even
think it. He doubted he would ever see her again.

“Second Corps has been destroyed,” he repeated softly, “and now Prince Iroh intends to trap Jenju in
a ring of fire.”

Unable to contain himself, Fong stepped forward.

“We must attack then now, General! Send me back with…”

Nifong turned to face his subordinate, his expression cold. Fong stopped in mid-sentence, hope
dying on his face.

“Colonel, you disobeyed my orders and the orders of your Corps Commander.”

Fong looked at the ground in shame.

“Why?”

The young cavalry commander closed his eyes.

“Sir, I... I hoped to capture Mequon by surprise… and end the war once and for all.”

“Colonel,” Nifong replied without a trace of emotion, “I asked you to help me whip these people…
instead… you’ve helped them to destroy us.”

It was as stern a rebuke as he ever gave.

Fong knelt down on one knee, “General, let me redeem myself in combat, it’s what I’m best at,
please…”

“No, Colonel, you have been relieved. You are to stay and bury every soldier who has fallen
because of what you’ve done here. You will tend this most hallowed ground for as long as you are
able. That is your punishment.”

Crestfallen, Fong bit his lip, but offered no protest, for he knew the punishment was fitting. The
disgraced officer looked up and dared a final question.

“Will you attack then, sir?”

“Yes, Colonel… that is mine,” he replied softly, more to himself than to Fong.

Fong bent over and touched his forehead to the earth in a gesture of submission. The others looked at
him with a mixture of sympathy and revulsion.

The adjutant turned away, remembering in shame how he had once shared the cavalry commander’s
enthusiasm.

“We must attack now,” Nifong continued, his voice in deadly earnest, “and with everything we’ve
got. The enemy has divided in two, relying on surprise and their new weaponry to make up for the
dilution of their strength. We have divided in three because of my indulgence and your recklessness.
Liu and his men have paid the price for our mistakes, may the Earth Spirit rest their souls… but if
we’re lucky, we’ll crush the enemy’s eastern force between us and Jenju. If not, we must at least
allow time for her to escape.”
“Sir,” the young captain offered, clearly shaken at the miserable turn of events, “Shouldn’t we send for reinforcements, if not from the Council at least from Ningbo and Amiganza?”

Nifong considered this briefly before nodding and turning to address Wu-Ti’s messenger.

“Yes, return immediately to Wu-Ti. Instruct him to send a Letter of Summons to the governor of Ningbo. Don’t bother with the others. Amiganza is too far and the Council would send no help even if they could.”

The messenger saluted, but lingered a moment longer, an expression of expectation on his face.

“All right,” Nifong reconsidered with chagrin, “Have him send a message to General Xu as well. Inform him of the situation and request his assistance. I doubt he will come, and if he does this battle will already have long since been decided.”

The messenger saluted once again and left. Nifong turned back to the prostrate Colonel.

“Get up, Colonel,” he commanded, “You will bury no dead on your knees.”

Fong rose, his expression stricken, and left to serve his punishment.

As they watched him retreat, they saw another rider break away from the main column advancing along the Silk Road and approach them. Breathless, yet another messenger swung down from her saddle, saluted and addressed Nifong, her eyes wide with fear.

“Sir! We’re under attack! Fire Nation armor on our left flank!”

The effect on the gathering was electric. Every breath came up short and every eye widened in the few moments it took for the news to sink in. The sudden appearance of Fire Nation tanks could have only one meaning.

Nifong clasped his hands behind his back and closed his eyes.

So this is their play.

“Strength and disposition?” the young captain asked, forcing himself to snap out of his stupor.

“Hundreds, Captain! They’ve cut the Silk Road and are driving a wedge between Third Cavalry and Sixth Infantry! It’s bad, sir – we got no warning from any of the southbound scouts!”

“Any markings?”

Deng knew the answer without knowing how.

“Yes, sir! I… I…,” the messenger stuttered, clearly struggling to force the fantastic truth from her lips, “They’re marked Fifth Brigade!”

“Impossible!” the young captain exclaimed, “They were destroyed at Lake Myojin! I saw it!”

Nifong leaned back and exhaled.

“No, Captain, not impossible. Prince Iroh and his friends are here. I underestimated him.”

Finally, he thought with a strange mixture of chagrin and satisfaction, a Fire Nation general worthy of the name…
Nifong picked up his helmet and remembered for the last time the beautiful fortuneteller he had left behind. Pushing thoughts of the woman he loved from his mind he turned to his adjutant as he strapped on his gear.

“The armor is a delaying tactic only,” he continued, “We must disable them and move on as fast as possible. Distribute orders to all commands. Instruct them to aim for their treads and leave them in the dust! This is the battle, Captain, here and now.”

Still, he thought, even if I lose Jenju as well, they will be exhausted and we will still have greater numbers… this is the test, please, Spirit of the Earth, give us the strength to prevail…

They mounted their steeds and raced west to face Prince Iroh and his resurgent Army of the Great Divide.
Sad Hill

Chapter Summary

Iroh crosses the land of dust and ash he has wrought while to the east Nikon begins the final showdown with the Army of the Granite Mountains.

The scene replayed in reverse. Iroh ran forward across the battlefield, his body drenched in sweat beneath his armor. He almost tripped once again, but this time over the corpse of a green clad spearman instead of one of his own, as he and his soldiers pursued the rapidly retreating Earth Kingdom army.

Without warning Jenju’s forces had abandoned their fixed positions, leaving their remaining siege equipment where it lay. A cheer had erupted along the Fire Nation line when sunrise of the third day revealed the enemy’s retreat.

Iroh had immediately ordered pursuit, but since the enemy had remounted it was clear they were rapidly outrunning the invaders. In the distance, the Crown Prince could see the the golden pennants of Rhiannon, whom he had placed in command of the Fire Nation left, leap forward at the signal to advance.

The enemy’s retreat was short lived. As planned, and with horrifying effect, the rocket sleds of the Inferno and the Firestorm erupted in fury from their recently occupied positions on the low hills to the northeast. Iroh remembered sliding to a halt and hundreds of his soldiers doing the same around him as they watched the smoke trails burst forth in the distance. Silent in inception, the smoke trails were followed moments later by the barest sound of screaming on the wind.

What followed was etched in their memories forever. White flowers bloomed incandescent across the steppes once more. Iroh and his troops watched, frozen in horror, as great swathes of earth north of the Silk Road were consumed in the unholy fire. Rapid flashes in the air produced puffs of ink black smoke and were closely followed by booming reports.

In minutes the westerly wind had brought the acrid smelling clouds of white smoke to the Fire Nation line. They had prepared for this possibility as best they could by distributing bundles of wet rags and linens before dawn. Now every red clad soldier breathed through makeshift masks.

The world went white. Those few present who had survived Lake Myojin remembered with claustrophobic fear the fog from that deadly encounter. The reports and tremors in the earth subsided after a few minutes, but the smoke continued to swirl around them. Even through their masks the Fire Nation soldiers now coughed and hacked loudly, but they could nevertheless hear the screams and cries of the enemy far ahead.

Iroh could not tell how much time had passed, it could have been minutes, but it felt much longer. He tried counting, but lost track several times and gave up. Finally, after he thought about twenty minutes had passed; he gave the order to his signalman who blew several sharp blasts on his tsunghi horn.

The Fire Nation army began to move forward slowly at regulation pace. Iroh could hear the signalman’s call relayed northward as other horns repeated the call. He looked ahead, the smoke still
swirling, but now there were patches of ground without smoke.

He perspired profusely and not because of exertion.

“Any minute now, come on... come on...” he thought feverishly, his brow creased as he willed the next event to happen.

He did not have long to wait.

This time the smoke from the last attack concealed the exact moment of the second. The dreadnoughts had also retrained their fire, as this barrage landed farther to the east and south than the first. The world erupted again in smoke and flame and the earth quaked under foot.

Iroh’s forces moved inexorably forward. He could hear rather than see a few Earth Kingdom stragglers emerge from the smoky hell before them only to be cut down instantly by the art of the Fire Lord’s finest. These occasional bursts of combat steadily slackened to a trickle and then finally stopped. Farther to north he could hear the same intermittent noises of battle, but these too soon ceased.

The smoke intensified once again, swallowing the army whole. Every eye burned and watered. Even through the dampened rags most had difficulty breathing. The army marched doggedly to the east. Soon they began to feel the heat from the burning ground devastated by the second attack.

Suddenly, unable to see more than a few feet in front of his face, Iroh stepped out on to nothing at all. Next to him three or four other soldiers did the same. He found himself falling feet first through open air. Next to him his companions screamed in surprise and anguish. His mind, on the verge of exhaustion, snapped into sharp focus.

He had just enough time to break his fall with blasts of fire from his feet and an arc of flame from a sweep of his arm. He landed with a lurch, but undamaged at the bottom of an obviously earthbent trench. One of his companions landed as well as he, but the others landed roughly. A sharp crack announced a broken leg for the nearest soldier. To their left and right many other soldiers took the same fateful step into nothing.

Iroh rushed over to the fallen man, the others joining him.

“I’m not a doctor, but that sounded like a break,” Iroh observed

“Yes, General,” the young soldier agreed through gritted teeth, determination not to shame himself by crying glittered in his eyes, “leave me, I failed you.”

He recognized him as one of the organizers of the short lived rebelling on the Nasu. Iroh ignored the wounded soldier’s request and instead called up those standing atop the trench who had stopped short to avoid falling. He issued orders for the engineers to deploy the rope bridges and help all those who had fallen to extricate themselves.

“Nonsense,” he replied, turning back to the injured soldier, “You didn’t fail anyone. You’re not getting any fighting done today though,” he grinned, “So your only punishment is you won’t be able to tell your grandkids how many dirt slingers you killed today!”

The young man forced himself to offer a grin that quickly turned into a grimace.

“That is a heavy punishment, sir. I can’t believe I walked all the way across that desert to fall in a damn hole.”
Iroh left the young man to be cared for by the others.

Soon he was across the makeshift trench with the forward companies. The heat from the ground intensified so that they were all slick with sweat. They marched up a gentle slope to the crest of a low, wide hill.

Within minutes they came to the area devastated by the second attack. Here the remains of another obstacle the defenders had thrown up in their retreat could be seen. What had once been a twenty foot wall of earth and stone had been blasted apart by the outermost projectiles of the rocket sleds’ firing solution.

The scene that lay beyond the obliterated rampart was unlike any Iroh had ever seen. Smoke still billowed in great grey and white swirls from huge patches of raw, blasted earth. Large sections of ground still burned with the white, incandescent fire released by the incendiary rockets. As they approached the fires dwindled, though they continued to liberate vast clouds of acrid smelling gas.

The ground was scarred and wounded, to be sure, but the human remains scattered about the strike zone rendered it truly terrifying. His eyes stung as if by buzzard wasps, but Iroh could not help but scan the battlefield over and over from one end to the other.

Body parts littered the landscape. Large numbers of severed heads, most thankfully obscured by the helmets still attached to them, left the observer with the twisted impression of some sadistic game of croquet. A few had rolled against others in the bottom of the craters. Arms and legs, bloody, burnt and grotesque, were all equally in evidence, as well as the smoldering torsos of both men and ostrich horses.

There wasn’t an intact body to be seen.

“AGNI Almighty, General,” a nameless old soldier said from his left, “this is one sad looking hill.”

“Yes, soldier, it is,” Iroh agreed.

They marched forward, but there was no one to fight. The smoke was dissipating as the fires went out and the westerly wind carried the dense clouds of poison away.

In the distance they could hear the clash and din of serious fighting begin to the east. The ring of fire had closed, and the remains of Jenju’s First Corps now faced encirclement between the converging Fire Nation formations.

Dimly Iroh knew he should be thinking about Nikon and Tien Shin. The fate of the Fire Nation was now in their hands. Instead, he could only see the devastation before him. He remembered it for the rest of his life. The spectacle left a much deeper impression than had their march through the desert. The latter experience had left him weak, disoriented and numb. Crossing the poisoned wasteland east of Mequon, however, he was sharp, his senses unnaturally heightened by the beauty of the rockets in stark contrast to their hellish and unholy effect.

No more missiles were launched. He didn’t expect any. After all, they had planned meticulously. Every set counted. Each set had to count. As Iroh looked around, he was certain each one had. He did not regret the devastation, but it sickened him nevertheless.

He pushed forward into the land of dust and ashes.

Nikon closed the hatch. The response was almost automated and it had saved his life countless times. A fraction of a second later the dull thud of a boulder impact rang clear. The machine barely stuttered
as it absorbed the blow. A fine mist of dust and shards of stone rained down around the daimyo.

He popped open the hatch and stood once again in the cupola. He was exhausted. They were all exhausted. They had fought for days now without rest. They had attacked, retreated west, and attacked again. Once they had cut clear across Nifong’s column, turned around and attacked from the northeast. Over and over. Each time the enemy had slowed to parry the attack, hoping to thrust them aside. Nikon’s machines had moved at full speed every moment. Their engines screamed and clanked having run for far too long without maintenance. Now, they struggled, agonized, and crawled to the end of their journey.

They had just finished their last charge. Each engagement had cost them. There were less than thirty of them left. Most of the infantry, exposed as they were above deck, had suffered badly in the first battles. Less than a few dozen remained, clinging bravely to their iron mounts and firing almost blindly at anything green that moved. Now they fled west, hoping to reach Tien Shin’s rear before they were overwhelmed.

But they had succeeded, despite the crushing losses, and they knew it. This was their only consolation and it wasn’t much. Nifong had lost another day, perhaps more, but the delay was over. Fifth Armor was finished.

“Fire!”

Two incoming stones, clearly aimed at their treads, exploded seconds before impact, felled almost certainly by Leng. Her aim had become legendary. She had spent as much effort protecting their vehicle as she had attacking the enemy.

“Trench!” Jin yelled from below.

It was a tactic that had claimed many of their comrades. The earthbenders had raised huge walls of stone and sunk deep trenches at every opportunity. Whenever they succeeded in slowing down the Fire Nation machines, they launched everything they had at the tread guards and then the treads they protected. As Nikon had predicted, blown treads had quickly translated into death.

Two tanks burned in front of them. One of them was Flaming Bitch. Su Lin’s broken body lay slumped over her turret where her skull had been crushed.

“Do it, Jin!” Nikon thundered in response.

The tank driver didn’t reply. He knew what to do. Nikon and the gunners rapid fired at the Earth Kingdom cavalry closing behind them. The shots went wild and none found their mark.

Moments later the Fury slammed into the rear of Su Lin’s crippled machine. The engine protested as the daimyo’s tank pushed the wreck into the ditch. Using the flaming corpse as a bridge, the Fury crossed the trench to the western side. The surviving machines quickly followed Nikon’s lead. The trench disappeared as the Earth Kingdom forces approached, raised by the same earthbenders who had created it to allow easy passage for their pursuit.

Nikon turned to look behind them. He had sweat his uniform through long ago and its material slid against his skin in a sickening fashion every time he twisted his body. He ignored it. He knew their time was almost up.

“Swing us ‘round!”

The Fury and her companions slowed, pivoted on their starboard treads and turned to face their pursuers.
“Fire!” he ordered again for what was probably the thousandth time.

The tank commanders and their gunners opened up at once. This volley found its mark, striking dozens of ostrich horses and their riders. They fired again, killing the riders who had their mounts struck from under them, their bodies writhing in agony as they perished.

The second wave came right behind them. Taking advantage of the armor’s reduced speed, two of the tanks were suddenly raised high into the air on pillars of rock raised from the earth. They came crashing down on their sides, smoke pouring from their engine compartments. Several other pillars erupted from the ground, but missed their marks as the drivers of the targeted tanks swerved to avoid the attack.

“Reverse! Reverse!” the daimyo screamed, his voice hoarse.

The shrunken Fire Nation brigade screeched to a halt, shifted gears with audible clanks of protest, and began to move backwards. This time the invaders fired in unison without instruction. The volley was true once again and many members of the second rank of green clad pursuers went down. Two tanks to their left, Great Eastern and Sparkler, launched volleys of flaming pitch from their side catapults, lighting many of the pursuers on fire.

Then it happened.

The Sparkler, seconds after she had fired her catapults, began to buck and stutter. She quickly fell behind. Moments later she was joined by several other tanks exhibiting the same symptoms, as if they had all suddenly been struck by some strange form of group epilepsy.

It was, Nikon knew, inevitable. He had been waiting for it. So had every other tanker. Now, their grim wait was over. They were out of fuel. They’d run for more than thirty six hours straight and had burned the last of the precious resource distributed immediately before the carnage on the Field of Coins.

The other survivors saw it as well. Without instruction, for they had planned for the evil moment, they stopped and reversed direction once again.

The affliction spread rapidly throughout the formation. Half a dozen others began to stutter before they rejoined Sparkler. Still, the double back confused the pursuers who broke wide on either side of the resurgent armor.

Fury smashed into the sides of two mounted spearmen who tried to swing across their path. One of them launched a spear at Nikon but missed, the projectile whistling past the daimyo’s shoulder. He ducked to avoid getting hit, but Leng and one of the side gunners opened fire just as the tank slammed into the animals that carried them. The result was a flaming mass of broken flesh which the mighty machine thrust aside with its still powerful engine.

Nikon stood back up and tapped Leng’s shoulder with his foot in an oft repeated gesture of thanks.

Ahead he saw the Sparkler no more than fifty feet away. She was immobile and had obviously been flipped over by a pillar of earth, but she had rolled completely over back onto her belly. Her commander, a scarred middle aged woman he recognized as one of Tien Shin’s, took careful aim at one of her attackers and picked him off with blast of bright orange fire. Several Fire Nation soldiers, infantry who had ridden Sparkler since the Field of Coins, lay dead on the ground, pierced by the long pikes used by the enemy who could not earthbend.
Surrounded by almost a dozen ostrich horse cavalry, Nifong’s vanguard appeared ready for their next attempt. As Nikon watched, several of Sparkler’s tormenters lifted perfect cones of stone neatly out of the ground at their feet, the sharp tips pointing like fingers of death at her flank armor. First used at Cam’ron, this tactic had also claimed its share of victims.

“Cones!” he heard someone scream from a tank somewhere behind him.

The Fury bounded forward. To her left Great Eastern reappeared, firing at the enemy around Sparkler. Leng fired twice as well. The sudden reappearance of the Fire Nation armor broke the enemy’s attention on the disabled vehicle.

“Grenade!” Nikon yelled.

As the distance shortened Nikon lifted one of Chieng’s devices from his belt. It felt cold, hard and heavier than it should be for its size. He had no idea what was in it and he didn’t care. All he knew was it meant death for the enemy and life, even if just a little longer, for his comrades.

Leng and her mate on Great Eastern immediately disappeared into their bolt holes. Nikon had only used two of them so far, but that was enough to spread word of their effect throughout the unit. Just as he twisted the top of the cylinder several more green clad cavalrymen swept over the low rise on which Sparkler was surrounded.

Even better, the thought flashed through his mind in a moment of grim satisfaction.

He threw the device amidst the enemy. The commander of the Sparkler had already disappeared back into her turret. The closest Earth Kingdom defenders actually stopped and looked down at the device in puzzlement, unaware that it was a weapon. They wondered why the enemy had thrown a toy at them, for it was shaped like a pin used in a popular Earth Kingdom game that many of them had played as children.

The explosion was deafening and when Nikon opened his own hatch the Sparkler was alone. The besieging force had been annihilated. The corpses of the ostrich horses and the ghastly, acrid cloud of smoke that was the signature of these devices were clearly seen, but the bodies of their pursuers were more difficult to locate. The daimyo did not bother.

Great Eastern now began to stutter and buck, coming to rest some distance north of their well tenderized sister. Another, bearing the name Victory, came to rest between them.

Nikon quickly scanned the battlefield. To his surprise he could see the thin ribbon of the Hue Road right behind them and the thicker expanse of the Silk Road immediately to their north.

Their zig zag path had brought them to the crossroads of the two mighty arteries.

On the far side of the Hue Road he saw three other tanks firing rapidly on the Earth Kingdom stragglers who had just scored a lucky hit on Victory, blowing off her port side drive wheel. Moments later there were only the tanks that swung slowly around to rejoin their dwindling comrades.

Suddenly the combat, which had raged fiercely only moments before, was over. There was no evidence of enemy activity. The horizons were empty.

The sun shone at a crazy angle over the nearest rise. Sunset was upon them. In the sudden silence they could hear the din of combat to the west. The rapid, dull thuds of artillery could clearly be heard beneath the noise of men and metal. Behind them they could see the nearest ridge was aflame. The
remains of the Earth Kingdom First Corps fought grimly to the death, insisting on taking every life they could in return for each taken from them.

“So what now, Commander?” Jin piped from below.

“We wait for Second Corps to show up… or the enemy,” Nikon replied, “Shut her down.”
Jin complied and the Fury’s engine sputtered and died.

“I’m going to see who’s left and get them organized.”

Nikon jumped down from the turret and began to canvas the wreckage around them for survivors and operating tanks.

“We’re not going to make it, girls,” Jin announced gruffly to the rest of the crew, “Make sure they pay for it.”

Grim silence was his only reply.
Chapter Summary

Nikon's makes a last stand against the Army of the Granite Mountains... while Chieng, Gan and Tien Shin make fateful decisions.

The moon had appeared and then been swallowed by a ceiling of low clouds. Soon it would be dawn. Gan had slept fitfully for a few hours while Chieng, Tang and the shift technicians worked feverishly to repair *Corona*. The engineer had resisted when he came to relieve her, but he had succeeded by pointing out that she herself had formulated the repair strategy and all he had to do was supervise.

Chieng awoke a short while later to find the work almost finished. As the work concluded they climbed out onto the rooftop of the *Inferno* once again. There they could see the dying embers of combat still burning to their south and east. The remains of the enemy’s vanguard still struggled, but they were trapped, smashed as they had been between Iroh and Tien Shin. Most of all, the rocket attacks had wreaked devastation upon the enemy as they had at the Field of Coins.

“We’re done here,” Gan stated flatly, “If there’s any chance to save Nikon we have to move now.”

Chieng nodded.

“This will make no difference to our decision, but you do realize he may already be dead… and that we may find ourselves alone and unsupported?”

The southeast horizon continued to burn. The outcome was certain, but Iroh and Tien Shin weren’t yet finished.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “A risk we are both willing to take.”

“We aren’t just risking ourselves, Gan,” she observed with a slight tinge of reproof, “we are risking our crews as well.”

“I’m aware of that,” he replied testily, “but we aren’t risking them just to save Nikon, we’re making a play to help Fifth Brigade do their job. If Nifong slams into Tien Shin’s rear before he’s ready to turn about we’re going to be in major trouble.”

Chieng considered this and nodded once again.

“Let’s move.”

The first streaks of dawn stained the eastern sky. Nikon’s belt was empty. The last of the grenades had been used to repel the attack that had ended only minutes before.

Wave after wave of green clad soldiers had been outright destroyed. The first few, including the one when they had run out of fuel the night before, had been little more than skirmishing parties. These
had been killed off to a man such that no word had been passed back of their location, though the light and smoke of the firebender’s art never failed to attract the attention of the enemy and their location near the great crossroads made contact inevitable.

Now, the main body of Nifong’s army was upon them and there was nowhere to run. Exhausted beyond human endurance, they could not run even if they had wanted.

Victory and Great Eastern were now flaming wrecks. Fury had made it to the end, but had finally been flipped when she had run out of fuel. Her exposed belly had been cracked open by a mighty boulder, suffering the same fate as her sisters at Lake Myojin. Nikon, Leng and one of the gunners had made it out alive. Jin, whose bolt hole had been blocked by the ground where the tank had come to rest, and the other gunner, had not.

The grassy steppe lay scorched and burning before them. To the west, perhaps a few leagues past the Hue Road, the landscape had been bright with fire at night and filled with smoke, carried slowly west on the wind, during the day. These tell tale signs of battle had died down hours before. Each of the survivors prayed for deliverance in the hope that the rest of the army had achieved their second objective and was now moving east to rescue them.

None could bear to talk about the possibility of survival, for they knew that hope often proved a merciless cheat. Instead they chose to memorialize their comrades as they fell. Each of them believed it would be the only chance they had to do so and each fully expected their turn to be next. What would their comrades say about them? They would never know.

Nikon and the surviving members of his crew sat, their bodies heavy with exhaustion, their backs resting on the shattered hull of their faithful machine. None of them had liked Jin, but they felt his loss keenly all the same. Tight lipped, faces taut, they waited for the inevitable.

“Jin was a son of a bitch,” Nikon commented after a long silence, “but he sure knew how to drive a tank, didn’t he?”

“I hated him, my lord,” Leng replied without emotion, “but, yeh… he taught me how to drive a tank.”

She meant what she said, but she’d have risked her life to save his just the same, and they all knew it. This was no conjecture, she had saved his life many times and he hers. Out here, if you lived long enough, you learned you fought together or you died. It was that simple.

“I didn’t really know him,” the surviving gunner offered, an older man who’d been with the Army of the Great Divide for many years under General Ho, “but he sure gave more than he got.”

Leng made a noise of grudging agreement.

“We’ll be lucky if any are left to say the same of us,” she observed.

They lapsed again into a melancholy silence, leaving only the sound of the breeze and the burning wrecks. A few moments later a couple survivors from Sparkler and Great Eastern appeared.

“We’re all finished, my lord,” the commander of the Sparkler announced, taking off her goggles and throwing them to the ground, “Looks like we’re all on foot now.”

Iroh’s friend looked up at the newcomers.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he replied stoically, “so it would seem. Any others left?”
“Yeh, I think there are a few machines running up there,” she jerked her thumb to the north, “but most are in the same position we are.”

Nikon grunted. There couldn’t be more than a couple hundred soldiers left.

“Wenyu, isn’t it?”

He was good with names, especially female. Wenyu was easily twenty years his senior, all of it in the service of the Fire Lord, and she exuded the sort of quiet, kind confidence that sustained others in the direst of battles. She was sorely needed today.

“Yes, sir, and thanks for saving our skins earlier.”

Nikon grinned brusquely and nodded. They both knew the reprieve would be short lived. A few more tankers appeared, sweaty and dirty, from some of the other machines.

“You gonna let’em have it when they find us again, daimyo?” she continued.

The question hung in the air. Leng and the rest of the survivors surveyed their young commander either openly or by casting sidelong glances. Everyone knew of Nikon’s, and for that matter Iroh’s, prowess at the national art.

Iroh’s friend blew out a great breath of air and rose slowly to his feet, his body protesting loudly at the inconvenience. Leng and the old gunner followed suit.

“Yuh,” Nikon replied, “no point in being coy about it now is there?”

“Nope,” she replied laconically, “don’t think so.”

With one smooth motion Nikon removed his helmet and dropped it on the ground, followed swiftly by his breastplate. He would need the freedom of movement.

“Just give me space everyone,” he instructed as he kicked his gear out of the way, “and for Agni’s sake don’t get in front of me.”

Leng stiffened at the instruction, refusing to look at her commander.

“They’ll drop everything and target you the moment they see sparks, my lord.”

Nikon winked at her.

“That’s right, sweetheart, but I’ve got you to protect me, don’t I?”

The words were cavalier, but the sentiment was sober. It wasn’t a come on, it was a gesture of respect.

She met his gaze, her expression sad. She’d fought with him for months before he even learned her name. This wasn’t arrogance, or a rebuke, she had eventually realized, it was self preservation. Only consistent survival showed fellow soldiers that you were worth the risk of attachment. The last moment of joy she remembered was when Nikon first addressed her by name during the nightmare of the Ping Tou.

Now, she would die with him.

The westerly wind soon brought expected and unwelcome news. The sound of galloping feet on well trodden, broken earth heralded the arrival of the enemy once more.
The survivors turned to face east. The light wind rustled the sleeves of their tunics.

“daimyo,” Leng began as the sound of their final encounter grew louder, “I just want say… while I still can, it’s been an honor to serve…”

She was cut off as Nikon stepped forward and crushed her in a bear hug. She returned the embrace, tears streaming down her otherwise stoic face. He lifted her clean off the ground and swung her back and forth like a rag doll before depositing her gently on the ground. His expression never changed.

The commander of the Sparkler smiled grimly at the display of affection. Once separated, she saluted her superior her smartly. The rest did the same. Nikon, his face blackened with soot from hours and days of combat, his countenance expressionless, returned the gesture.

A vast green wall appeared on the low rise directly in front of them.

The time for conversation was over.

As the green tide bore down and the world narrowed once more, he remembered only the grace and beauty of the woman who had captured his heart on the ramparts of the great fortress, yearning in that last moment for the touch of a stranger’s hand in a burning, desperate land.

Tojo once again stood next to the elder prince. They had met only an hour before as their units disposed of the last Earth Kingdom soldiers between them. They faced east atop one of the endless and nameless low rises that comprised the steppe. Exhausted, but victorious, they had commandeered a pair of kimodo rhinos from some scouts to reconnoiter themselves.

Flashes of white light on a cloudless day and the dull thudding of the earthbender’s art telegraphed the battle that now raged very close at hand just beyond the Hue Road that lay in front of them. Thin pillars of black smoke rose to the sky in the foreground, dwarfed in size by the enormous, hazy grey dust cloud that spanned the eastern horizon.

The view through their sight glasses showed the burning wrecks of numerous Fire Nation tanks. North and south of the smoking conflagration, rivers of Earth Kingdom cavalry and heavy infantry, the body of Nifong’s massive Third Corps, moved inexorably westward.

“I don’t see any movement, your Highness,” Tojo observed tonelessly, “but it’s hard with all the smoke. Looks like we’re too late to save the armor… Nikon may already be dead.”

“Don’t be stupid, Commander,” Tien Shin replied instantly, his tone angry and sullen at the forced admission of his usurper’s prowess, “Where do you think that lightning is coming from?”

He hated that the young upstart had mastered the art of producing sky fire almost as much as he envied his ability to produce the coveted blue flames that burned hotter than his own. The whim of Agni in bestowing these gifts on such an unworthy recipient made him only the more determined to have his throat cut in some Shinjuku alley after their return. He had no need of a treason trial to dispose of such a sewer rat. Macro would see to that.

Tojo folded his sight glass and stuffed it in a saddlebag.

“Do we wait then, sir?”

That was the question. The elder prince’s eyes slid over to cast a sideways glance at his subordinate.
The question was too probing for his comfort. Tien Shin shared his mind with no one, and those impertinent enough to presume otherwise usually suffered the consequences sooner rather than later. He decided to ignore Tojo’s behavior and concentrate on the dilemma.

He turned back to the view ahead, scanning the battle taking place before their eyes. He considered the options coldly.

Behind them the infantry of Second Corps advanced east at regulation pace to maintain formation. The artillery, pulled now by teams of mighty dragon moose in lieu of the tank trains, came up close behind. At that speed they could reach the battle very quickly, but a single command would halt the army for a much needed rest and to scout out the situation. Who would blame him if they arrived too late? Perhaps Tojo was right after all… Nikon and his men were probably already dead. A little extra time is all that would be needed to make sure…

Tien Shin gritted his teeth and blew out a large breath. He folded his sight glass with a vicious snap and put it in his own saddlebag. The decision made, he acted quickly.

“No, Commander,” he contradicted suddenly, “Order double quick time, now!”

Tojo blinked and did a double take.

“Sir?” he questioned stupidly, surprised by the decision and uncertain if he had heard it correctly.

His immediate answer was a blue enameled war fan poised at his throat.

“I said double quick time, fool!” the elder prince thundered, “Victory for the Fire Nation is all that matters!”

“Yes, sir!” Tojo responded, his eyes wide and holding his body perfectly against the threat at his neck.

“Deploy the artillery immediately, maximum range! Move the archers up with the firebenders, let the blade carriers follow up behind! Now move!”

Tien Shin removed the war fan right before Tojo kicked his mount into a gallop. Moments later the wall of red surged forward.
Chapter Summary

Fifth Brigade's last stand.

The remnants of the Fifth Brigade had formed a double deep firing line minutes before the enemy had crested the adjacent hill. A screen of Earth Kingdom cavalry swept before a deep formation of heavy infantry. Wary of the field of burning wrecks, the green clad pursuers had reduced speed to survey the situation. Lying prone, the exhausted Fire Nation tankers had stood up when Nifong’s best were less than a hundred feet away. The first line had fired, dropped and rolled followed neatly by the second.

Stunned by the unexpected resistance from the graveyard of flaming metal corpses, a few ostrich horses had thrown their riders, but the majority of the cavalry had charged instantly. Breaking their line, the newly minted firebender infantry allowed the cavalry to pass before firing directly into their exposed flank. Their mounted opponents responded mostly with hand held weapons, many of them blunt as their preferred element, and only the Fire Nation’s steel armor saved the ragged survivors from succumbing right then.

Nikon had detached himself from the small body of his troops and retreated some distance behind with Leng and the older gunner from the Fury. He watched balefully the oncoming mass of enemy cavalry and looked in despair on the heavy infantry following close upon the heels of the mounted vanguard. Hundreds of fresh earthbenders backed, he saw, by densely packed formations of spearmen, meant the outcome of this encounter was certain. Iroh’s friend barely registered the two stones that his crewmates blasted into showers of silicon fragments as he methodically began his windup.

His stance wide, his root solid, the young daimyo drew a single full breath, and then slowly and deliberately swung his left arm out in a wide semicircle. Blue sparks instantly began to dance around his hands and finger tips. As his left arm completed its swing he began the same motion with his right. He felt the raw electric potential jump within his body, a sensation he had always cherished, his chi swelling and exploding inside him, begging to be split. With his arms crackling and popping with the same energy as their opposite, he brought his middle and index fingers of each hand together.

In one swift motion he thrust his right hand forward and released the full charge of lightning from the tips of his fingers.

The effect was catastrophic. One moment the green clad cavalrymen were riding at full gallop, swinging maces, clubs and a few swords at the firebenders who were backing away from them, the next they and their mounts were writhing on the ground, their bodies jerking uncontrollably, their exposed skin smoking and boiling away into the atmosphere around them. Some clawed out their eyes as they liquefied in their sockets. Not one victim screamed, though every mouth was open wide, the sound dying in their throats before it was made. They died shrieking in their heads.

Spent and exhausted, Nikon staggered backwards after the discharge. Leng caught him as he went down, then cried out in pain as a sudden blow from a stone that glanced off her left shoulder. Two ostrich horsemen who had escaped the lightning surged forward, closing the short distance between them and Nikon’s group in seconds.
“Agni, help us!” the young gunner cried.

Her prayer was answered. *Xian’s Revenge* and another tank Nikon did not immediately recognize suddenly appeared from their left. Amidst the din and clamor of battle they had missed the familiar roar and metallic squealing of the Fire Nation machines as they navigated the scattered remains of their brethren.

The *Revenge* knocked over one of the ostrich horses, sending its rider rolling over the grass, and forcing the other to wheel around. The older gunner launched fireball after fireball in rapid succession at the cavalryman who had remained seated, but missed as the rider spun away. Nikon recovered his breath and stood up, helping Leng do the same. The commander of the nameless tank shot the ostrich horse out from under the other rider.

The air suddenly whistled with sheets of stone hurled in perfect formation. Nikon looked up to see lines of enemy infantry now rapidly closing the distance. Of their comrades who had manned their ragged line just minutes before there was no trace. A large boulder struck *Xian’s Revenge*, but it exploded harmlessly on its chassis, her commander wisely retreating into the turret.

Nikon took another breath and began his wind up once again. The enemy were close enough that he could he could pick out individual voices. They rang in his ears. He understood them, but they failed to affect him, as if he were seeing a play or a street performance in the capital from a different lifetime.

“Lightning bender!”

“Forget the tanks!”

“Kill the sparky!”

A spear whistled over his shoulder. He ignored it. Leng and her partner destroyed the nearest projectiles that came hurtling toward them, but one caught the elder gunner square in the chest. Even through his armor he could hear the crunch of bone. Nikon ignored this too. The remaining tanks had reversed gear and were firing in retreat, giving Iroh’s friend a last opportunity to fire between them into the surging ranks of the enemy.

The heavy set, bearded infantrymen who comprised the guts of the Army of the Granite Mountains were no fools. Lightning benders were rare and powerful, but they had long since learned how to face them in battle. Seconds before Nikon unleashed his next charge the green clad soldiers halted and squatted close to the ground, their bare feet bandy legged to provide a solid connection to the earth beneath them. In unison they smashed their fists into the open palm of their opposite hand and lifted a solid shield of thick stone before them.

His body once again prickling with electric potential, Nikon had no choice but to discharge. The lightning surged out of his body and struck the wall directly in front of him. The impact area promptly vaporized, blasting a hole ten feet wide in the blockade and killing all the defenders immediately behind. Chunks of rock and a cloud of blasted fragments rained down on the survivors.

The Earth Kingdom soldiers cheered, for they knew what it cost even for a master firebender to use the technique, and the defensive wall had prevented the chain lightning from doing precisely what it had done to the cavalry screen.

Nikon staggered, his tongue lolling out of his mouth in utter exhaustion. The world spun around him. He grabbed Leng and pulled her to the ground, inadvertently saving them both from death as the Granite Mountain infantry kicked the wall they had just created and sent it flying in pieces at the
invaders. The broken stones whistled over their heads close enough for the concussion of air to blow their hair back.

He lay on the ground, his breath knocked out of him. Days of combat without rest and the extreme effort required to bend lightning had left him incapacitated. Leng had fallen on top of him. She too was spent, but she rolled off and into a crouching position facing the enemy. Quickly she scanned the battlefield back and forth but he could not tell what she saw.

Gasping on the ground and clutching his belly, Nikon rocked slowly from one side to the other, his body in shock as he tried to recover his breath. Overhead he was dimly aware of a hail of objects arcing low across the sky, small thin lines that winked and flashed across his vision in an instant. His mind struggled to name them, for he knew them to be a familiar sight. Sheets and sheets of the projectiles streaked over their heads in the direction of the enemy. These were soon joined by flaming balls of pitch that left oily black smoke trails behind them.

Suddenly he returned to his senses and the world resolved itself around him. Leng was pulling him backwards and trying to get him to his feet.

“Get up, my lord!” Leng shouted hoarsely.

Nikon recovered his breath and staggered to his feet. The Earth Kingdom infantry had withered under the storm of arrows which rained down upon them. Huge gapings holes had opened up in the ranks of the defenders where the balls of flaming pitch had impacted. The two Fire Nation tanks that had appeared minutes before were in turn joined by several others and were taking advantage of the surprise ranged attack to drive directly into the densely packed mass of opponents.

Surprised and elated by the sudden turn of events, Iroh’s friend looked behind them to divine the source of their apparent deliverance. There on the Hue Road stood rank upon rank of red clad archers who fired, knelt and reloaded in quick succession. Between the gaps in their ranks poured solid rivers of skull masked infantry wearing flame emblazoned armor. Behind them catapults obscured by the intervening bodies launched blazing fireballs in lazy arcs over their heads.

The roar of the combat drew his attention back once again.

Maddened by the appearance of the Fire Nation reinforcements, the Earth Kingdom soldiers cried as one in animal fury. Ignoring the losses inflicted by slings and arrows, they surged forward without order.

Nikon began to wind up once more, hoping against hope that one last arc of lightning would allow Tien Shin’s men to reach them in time.

Tien Shin spent only a few seconds atop the Hue Road to scan the carnage before him. The devastation was second only to the soon to be legendary Field of Coins. The wrecks of dozens of Fire Nation tanks, most smoking or on fire, many with their bellies shattered like eggs, littered the battlefield. Had there been pools of blood soaked mud it could have been mistaken for Lake Myojin. The vanguard of Nifong’s main force was forcing its way rapidly through the pitiful band of exhausted Fire Nation soldiers before them. A few tanks, without question the last remnants of Nikon’s column, spun and fired wildly from their gunnery ports at the surging green wave that would soon overwhelm them.

No orders had been given to engage. Such a formality was unnecessary. Contact with the enemy
demanded a response. The archers had let loose flight after flight of their black feathered heralds of death. Tien Shin had joined them without hesitation. The elder prince fired his arrows two at a time. He rarely missed a mark.

Gaps had opened up between the companies of archers allowing huge rivers of heavily armored firebenders to pour through to meet their green clad counterparts now only a few feet away. They spread out like a maroon liquid which then instantly hardened to form neat, straight ranks.

Tien Shin kicked his mount, firing as he went, finding a place at the front where the infantry had not yet closed the gap. Beside him he saw Tojo do the same.

In front of them a few last firebenders from Fifth Brigade now engaged in hand to hand combat. Nearby one of the last few tanks in operation came down hard on its back and spit fire out of its guts.

The firing lines on either side of him unleashed a wide arc of fire in unison which collided with an incoming hail of rock. Both disintegrated into each other. A stone caught the elder prince in the shoulder, but glanced off his armor.

Suddenly his attention was yanked away from the exchange of fire by a fierce crackling and popping sound from his left. His hair stood on end as his body sensed a dramatic surge of electric potential. One of the ragged Fire Nation defenders, without armor or helmet, let loose a massive bolt of white hot lightening almost the instant Tien Shin identified the source. He covered his eyes as did many of the troops around him. The flash and heat penetrated even the skin of his hand and he was momentarily blinded.

The surge of raw electricity struck the oncoming line of green clad infantry, instantly filling the air with the screams of dying men and the stench of melting flesh.

Still reeling from the afterflash the elder prince was unable to see the immediate effect of the counterattack. While he blinked his eyes to regain his sight, he felt his mongoose dragon shudder and felt the sickening crunch of bone as it staggered underneath a hit from a nearby earthbender. Swearing profusely Tien Shin jumped the ground as the great green beast heaved underneath him in its death throes.

His sight finally restored, Tien Shin drew two arrows across his bow and discharged them into two green clad pikemen poised to throw at him. Even with the afterflash scoring his sight, both fell with an arrow through the heart or the eye.

In a flash nearly as bright as the lightening which caused it, he suddenly remembered who had to be the source of the counterattack. He felt a simultaneous rush of recognition and anger.

Tien Shin pivoted, firing two more sets of arrows into the enemy ranks before once again locating the source of the lightning.

There, amidst a bloody knot of ferocious hand to hand combat, Nikon Orlando, clearly recognizable without a helmet to obscure his features, struggled desperately against several huge Earth Kingdom soldiers who had finally reached his position. A single companion fought by his side, rapidly discharging fire balls from each hand as they fell back.

As he watched they were joined by men from his own formation, but they had no time to rescue the struggling survivors of the Fifth Brigade as they were instantly met with their own enemy to engage. In front of Nikon and his comrade several more earthbenders lifted chunks of stone from deep under the topsoil in preparation to attack. They were out of reach of his firebending, but not his archery. As he drew an arrow taut on his bowstring he saw Nikon strike down one opponent only to be grabbed
by two others, his captors ignoring the burns they suffered from his fists wreathed in blue flame.

Nikon’s companion, seeing the danger, fired several blasts of bright orange fire in quick succession at the earthbenders now aiming for them. One bolt struck an antagonist before he launched, the other destroyed the incoming stone as soon as the earthbender kicked it away.

Tien Shin drew bead on the last earthbender while Nikon and his companion tried desperately to free him.

He let fly his arrow… and missed.

Combat raged at the crossroads. The Earth Kingdom forces had torn both highways to pieces, hurling them with devastating effect at the invaders. The Fire Nation line, exhausted and exposed on the open land, had bent back on itself and then broken. The Army of the Granite Mountains poured through the break, the pikemen and infantry pushing the firebenders south while the cavalry went west, preparing to pivot quickly and strike against the enemy’s flank.

The first envelopment had proven a success and by all reckoning the point regiment had been well nigh destroyed. They now aimed to roll up the rest of the Fire Nation line as they had so effectively at Sun Valley and dozens of other battles.

Nifong and his aide drove through the gap with the lead forces. Using the basic horse stance he and his grizzled veterans had used thousands of times, the aging general himself had dispatched the last operating Fire Nation tank with a massive column of stone taken straight from the Silk Road.

The breach made, Nifong now waited patiently for information to plot his next move. The fog of war had long since descended and he knew that quick responses to rapidly changing conditions often meant the difference between victory and defeat.

“Here comes one now, sir,” the aide shouted over the noise of combat and movement, pointing to another breathless messenger who galloped toward them on horseback.

The young woman saluted. She and her mount breathed heavily from a long, hard ride.

“Hail, General!” she managed to croak.

“Report, Sergeant?”

“Not… not good, sir, Colonel Jenju has been defeated… badly.”

“Where?”

“About three hours ride west northwest of us.”

“What did you see?”

The scout shook her head, her jawline hardening.

“Looks like that the same thing that happened at the Field of Coins, sir, the fire spitters left nothing but a smoking hole in the ground. I didn’t get close enough to see much more than that since the enemy was almost on top of me.”

“You didn’t see anyone from Jenju’s outfit at all?” the young captain prompted incredulously.
“Yes, sir, I did. I saw a few big groups of what I think were survivors retreating north and northeast, but they had Fire Nation troops on them as well. I don’t think they’re going to be much help to us now.”

Nifong grimaced. This was confirmation of the first report they had received less than an hour before.

“What now, sir?” his adjutant prompted, “Break off the attack… or press it?”

The aging general considered his options. None of them were good. The path forward had shrunk every hour of every day since they had left Ningbo. Now, there seemed no path at all.

Unable to justify abandoning the only advantage he had, Nifong finally responded.

“Press it, Captain, we have little choice.”

“What about the dreadnoughts, sir?”

“They’ll target us next. Ready or not, the rock sleds have to engage them.”

The aide saluted and withdrew to issue the orders.

The Army of the Granite Mountains around them poured through the gap in the Fire Nation lines into an uncertain future.
The Road Warriors

Chapter Summary

Iroh tempts Fate... and Fate obliges.

Steam billowed from the vents of the *Constellation* as she headed northeast, her towage of arms and supplies slowing her down as much as the need to keep pace with the Fire Nation infantry she protected. The Crown Prince stood in the well of the forward siphon, scanning the horizon. He could see the Hue Road, but the intersection with the Silk Road was farther south than he could see.

“Excellent,” he thought, “Exactly where we wanted to be.”

The afternoon sun and the engine heat had turned the interior of the dreadnought into a furnace. He let the westerly wind dry some of the sweat from his hair and brow before reluctantly relinquishing his perch to the gunner on duty.

Iroh’s exhaustion and horror had long since been replaced by a growing sense of exhilaration. The Earth Kingdom forces besieging Mequon had been eliminated. Well, a few sizable groups had escaped to the north and east, but this hardly mattered. The victory was complete for all intents and purposes. Then the timely appearance of Tien Shin’s Second Corps had confirmed that the action at the Field of Coins had been decisively resolved in their favor. Most importantly, the messenger hawk they had received had brought news that kindled the greatest hopes they had dared in their hearts to entertain.

He felt slightly giddy as he considered these developments, an alien sensation that he did not altogether enjoy. Despite its disastrous beginning, he felt the battle progressing to his ever increasing advantage and tried desperately to stop himself from imagining a glorious homecoming after achieving total victory. He was not entirely successful, nor was he able to completely expel the image in his mind of Tien Shin’s face at having to acknowledge the feat in front of his father and the War College.

His mind so occupied, he was startled to find Rhiannon waiting for him on the bridge. She was dirty, her red steel armor dented ominously, but was otherwise unharmed. Next to her the elder “map buddy” and several scouts and messengers scribbled furiously on the campaign map before them.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, overjoyed to see her once again.

She smiled wanly and walked over. They embraced.

“We’re winning, Rhiannon!” he breathed into her ear, unable to control his hope and exultation, “I know I shouldn’t say it, but Agni Almighty, we’re winning!”

She understood his elation. The relief was in direct proportion to the fear and anxiety that had hung over them for weeks and months, but she also knew it was a mistake to give in to the temptation.

“Control yourself awhile yet, Iroh, please!” She begged quietly, “Do not tempt cruel Fate any more than we already have!”

They separated and exchanged salutes.
“Greetings, Colonel,” he began again in a louder voice for the benefit of the general staff working around them, “It is good to see you alive and well after such trials. What brings you before us now?”

He used her military title on the battlefield. Seldom did provincial governors command their garrisons in person, for even in these difficult times most were creatures of comfort and privilege, chosen for their loyalty to the Fire Lord rather than their military skill, but to her credit Rhiannon had taken the field herself when her charge had been threatened.

“News, General, and since we’re on the move I thought we could take advantage of the break in fighting to do some planning in person rather than by messenger.”

“Agreed, it’s not as if either of us is getting any sleep.”

She smiled in reply and he saw the dark circles under her eyes. He doubted he looked much better, but he allowed himself the question.

“When was the last time you slept?”

“A few hours yesterday morning.”

He considered ordering her to bed, but thought better of it. She knew her limits and he had learned to trust his friends and rely on their judgment. Perhaps this is what Xian had truly meant by gathering his friends close? Iroh felt a stab of loneliness at the thought of his cousin.

“What news then?” he finally prompted.

Rhiannon bit her lip before replying.

“The Dreadnought Battle Group cut across our front a few hours ago and rocketed off to the east. They picked up the Qing Dao Ridge and then headed south.”

Iroh’s brow furrowed.

“What’s she doing? That wasn’t the plan.”

The governor crossed her arms in response.

Iroh turned to the elder “map buddy” and the others still working on the campaign map.

“What’s their projected heading?” he asked as he and Rhiannon examined the chart.

“One six zero, south southeast, General,” the gaunt, white haired soldier replied, indicating the bright red line they had just drawn on the map.

“Making for the Hue Road?” Rhiannon offered.

“That seems likely, Colonel,” the aide replied, drawing his slender, bony finger along the red projection to where it intersected the artery some distance to the southeast, “it’s not far away.”

“But why?” Iroh cried in a frustrated voice, then turning to the charismatic governor continued, “Did we receive any communication from them?”

“No, nothing.”

He cursed himself for his premature victory fantasies. Things were finally going the right way, why had they done this? He never would have predicted such a deviation from Chieng or Gan given their
discipline.

“If they take the Hue Road south that’ll probably put them behind enemy lines, Iroh,” she continued quietly, her voice taut, “…unless we’ve received any word to the contrary from the daimyo.”

Iroh made quick eye contact with the other staff members, suddenly uneasy. His recent elation had rationalized Nikon’s silence with the certainty that he and the armor had survived the Field of Coins just as Tien Shin had. Why hadn’t they seen any tanks in the fight with Jenju though? That had been the plan. He had ignored the question until now.

Rhiannon, as if reading his mind, gave voice to the fear settling like a pall over his heart.

“Iroh, I’ve seen no armor… have you?”

“No,” he admitted.

He felt fear grip his heart like a vice. Chieng was hurtling head long into the middle of Nifong’s army. Nikon was silent. Something must have happened. Something bad.

A few moments of tense silence were broken by the elder aide.

“Forgive me, General, but I believe we have a much bigger problem.”

“What?” Iroh said sharply, grateful for the change of subject despite the ominous nature of the pronouncement.

“We just received word of a major enemy breakout on Prince Tien Shin’s northern flank,” the aide replied as one of the messengers used a wooden cue stick to indicate the most recent addition to the map, a rapidly expanding bulge in Second Corps’ front, “the enemy has control of the crossroads and his ostrich horse cavalry is moving through in great strength.”

There was still a large gap between Iroh’s southern flank and Second Corps’ collapsing northern flank – a gap Nifong was exploiting.

“Damn it!” Iroh exclaimed, slamming a fist down on the operations table.

He cursed himself again. Against his will he knew he had tempted Fate. The punishment was swift in coming.

“If we don’t close that gap, General, Second Corps will be wrapped up pretty quickly,” the old soldier observed calmly.

They had discussed the possibility of this situation in council, but had never developed an adequate contingency. In the end they had simply accepted it as one of the many risks of an extremely bold plan.

“Well what are our options then for Agni’s sake! Do I have to think of everything?” he thundered, suddenly at sea over a situation which seemed to be rapidly spinning out of control.

The bridge crew exchanged worried glances at the raised voices which they could not help but overhear. The “map buddy” and the messengers stood stock still.

“Remember your cousin’s advice, Iroh,” his friend offered gently, “Decisions made in anger seldom lead to victory.”

“Xian lost, Rhiannon, remember that!” he replied hotly, “He’d probably counsel some god damn
calming tea too and there’s no time for that either!”

He blew out a breath and wiped his brow which had begun to sweat again profusely. Forcing himself to calm down he addressed them in a more controlled voice.

“All right, let’s go over it again.”

Relief flooding his expression, the old staffer quickly recited the strengths, dispositions and distances of the forces contesting the battlefield. Iroh soon realized the “map buddy” was correct. There was only one course of action to take. The gap had to be closed – and fast.

“Okay, we have to commit the reserves,” Iroh said reluctantly, “I’ll take the Constellation as well. We’ll dump the supplies from the cars and load them with infantry instead.”

“That’s two regiments of rhino cavalry, half an infantry division and the Constellation… that may not be enough, Iroh,” Rhiannon cautioned, “and you know whoever is first to commit their reserves often loses…”

“What choice do we have!?” Iroh roared suddenly in anger, “If you have an alternative, Colonel, name it!”

She remained silent.

“Well, there you are then!” he concluded with no trace of satisfaction. He had made his point.

He saw her begin to wring her hands, the telltale sign of her worry. Instantly softening he addressed her again in a low voice only she could hear.

“Look, don’t worry. I live, remember? Think about it! That means I can do anything I want here and get away with it, right?”

She blanched at this horrifying statement, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

“Okay, okay,” he backpedaled quickly, “that didn’t help, sorry, but there isn’t much choice here.”

“What do I do?” she finally asked in a small voice.

“You’re needed here. You’re in command of First Corps now. Stick to the plan. You know what to do.”

She nodded.

They looked at each other, silently sharing their worries. They hugged once more.

“I’ll be fine and we will win this battle,” Iroh vowed.

“What about… what about… him?” she replied.

He squeezed her tighter, fear gripping his heart once again for his missing friend.

“I don’t know.”

The massive enemy vehicles had appeared with little warning. They had emerged from a shallow valley that opened up east of the Hue road. Crude and obviously modeled on the Fire Nation dreadnoughts, the huge stone leviathans were little more than square boxes of rock rolling on wide
granite wheels. The body of each rock train was a series of granite plates that could be lifted and thrown at will. Manned by teams of broad shouldered earthbenders, they alternated trying to ram the Fire Nation machines and hurling slices of their own carriages at the enemy.

One of the dull grey monstrosities had pulled up alongside after ramming Corona a few minutes earlier. The hull of the Fire Nation flagship had rung like a bell with the impact and she rocked back and forth drunkenly before settling once more on her treads.

“Chen Ho!” Chieng barked, “Increase pressure to one fifty! Kill the heat exchangers!”

Suddenly they heard the unmistakable sounds of feet on the roof.

“Boarders, Commander!” the Chief Boiler Operator gasped.

“Right!” Chieng acknowledged, “Prime the siphons! First Section, follow me!”

Moments later she emerged onto the roof where the source of the clanking overhead could be instantly observed. The top of Corona swarmed with Earth Kingdom soldiers who had jumped from the imitation dreadnought flying beside them. The two vehicles raced at ever increasing speed across the landscape. Gaps opened up between them only to disappear moments later as they collided again and again. Each time the gap closed more green clad soldiers jumped on Chieng’s flagship.

She quickly panned the scene around Corona. Ahead of them she could see Inferno had attracted the same problem. Behind them Nova remained clear, but was busy dodging massive, coin sized projectiles from another rock train.

*Three of them then at least.*

She had no time to locate Firestorm before another impact rocked the Corona. Chieng braced herself by grabbing a cleat on the forward siphon well, but the gunner was pitched over the side and lost. It hardly mattered. He was already dead, a green handled short sword protruding from his blood drenched neck.

Before she could stand an exceptionally well balanced Earth Kingdom soldier took the opportunity to punch her head and then kick her square in the belly. Chieng doubled over in pain, barely noticing the two Fire Nation technicians who crawled over her prone body and onto the deck.

Unable to recover, she watched in silent horror as the enemy produced another short sword, no doubt the mate to the one embedded in the dead gunner, and start to swing it down towards her head.

The green clad soldier was suddenly thrust backwards by a thick jet of flaming liquid. He burst into fire and fell backwards, dropping the sword inches from Chieng’s face. Droplets of burning naptha sprayed over her uniform and exposed skin. The pain forced her to react. Launching her body out of the siphon well, she rolled to put out the fires torturing her.

Still smoking, she spun to her feet and stood up, pulling her bo staff into a guard position. The enemy who had almost killed her burned a few feet away. He flailed wildly, trying desperately to put out the flames engulfing his body. She kicked the dying man in the chest, sending him over the edge.

Chieng looked aft to see the rear siphon gunner who had saved her life pouring liquid naptha onto
the enemy vehicle adjacent to them. Still gasping, she ducked as a mallet swung over the empty space she had just occupied. Without thinking she swept her foot in a wide arc, tripping her latest antagonist who fell to the deck plate with a clatter. One of her technicians fired several firebending blasts. The mallet wielder dodged the first two only to be caught in the face by the third.

She stood up once more to see her crew cleaning off the rest of the enemy boarders. The *Corona* had picked up speed and was now outrunning the enemy vessel. She now had the Earth Kingdom scow by more than half a length. Chieng felt the move coming before it happened.

“Hit the deck!” she screamed.

Most of her crew responded. Suddenly *Corona* swung sharply to port, her bow pulling squarely in front of the stone vehicle. The brakes screamed and *Corona* slowed rapidly, unceremoniously ejecting the remaining boarders and a few of her own crew. Steam poured from her vents as the ship dumped energy from the headers.

The earthbenders powering the enemy vessel overreacted. Barely able to control the monstrosity as it was, the attackers locked up the massive granite wheels and attempted to match *Corona*’s left hand turn. Ponderous, ill shaped and poorly designed, the stone leviathan began to tip over.

Chieng slid over the deck plate and into the empty siphon well.

*Just a little more…* she thought feverishly, *just a little more*…

She ripped a grenade from her belt, twisted the top, chucked it with all her might, then grabbed the siphon’s gunnery handles and released the pressure triggers. A bright orange jet of flaming naptha arced over the rapidly dwindling distance between the two vessels. Cries of surprise turned almost instantly into screams of pain as the forward section of the enemy vessel was rapidly covered in the burning liquid. Then a massive explosion shattered several of the massive stone plates that comprised the enemy arsenal.

The rock vehicle flipped, the concussion from the grenade pushing its center of gravity far outside its physical form. Green clad soldiers flew in all directions and not all in one piece. The stone leviathan rapidly disintegrated, sending chunks of granite high into the air.

She could hear cheers erupt from the crew below deck. Chieng swung her siphon to its forward position and picked up the intercom tube from its rocker.

“Now!” she bellowed.

*Corona*’s vents snapped shut and she lurched forward with renewed speed. Swinging sharply to starboard, *Corona* avoided the spinning wreck and began to close on *Inferno* and her unwelcome travel companion. The two vessels slammed repeatedly against each other and hand to hand combat raged on their rooftops. Chieng squinted. She recognized one of the figures atop the enemy leviathan.

*And the dumbass said he was just an accountant!*

She swore silently, angry that Nikon apparently wasn’t the only idiot.

“Pull up alongside!” she barked into the intercom.

“But Commander,” Chen Ho’s voice, tinny and thin, emerged from the speaker, “the road isn’t wide enough for all three!”
She could see he was right. The *Inferno* and her opponent swerved wildly back and forth, occupying almost the entire causeway.

“Ramming speed!”

*Corona* rocketed forward. Chieng dared not fire her siphon while heading into the wind, so she grabbed her staff and jumped out of the well. She ran forward and wrapped her free arm around one of the iron radiator veins that sprouted from the roof above the bridge like an ornate headdress. She was joined by two of her technicians who read her intent.

Seconds later *Corona* slammed into the rear of the enemy train engaging *Inferno*. Before they could separate Chieng sprang over the gap along with her companions.

Gan had two opponents, one of which stood between her and him. The Captain of the *Inferno* fired a quick blast of fire at the opponent between them who in turn took a swing with a large broadsword. The accountant dropped and rolled, allowing two actions to happen at once. The sword blow cut the earthbender behind Gan in half just as Chieng brought her bo staff down on the swordsman’s neck. She spun round and neatly swept the swordsman’s legs out from underneath him with the other end of her staff.

The accountant came to his feet, his eyes wide in recognition.

“What the hell!?” he yelled almost incoherently.

“Shut up!” she cried as the stone train slammed back into the *Inferno*.

Both almost lost their balance. The siphon gunner on the Fire Nation dreadnought opened up and set the front of the Earth Kingdom contraption on fire. Instantly everyone fighting on the roof began choking from the smoke.

“Shit!” Gan croaked.

Chieng felt a movement to her left and turned only to feel an armored fist slam into the same side of her face that had been hit earlier. She felt warm liquid spill down her cheek as she fell to the deck. The world slowed down and her perceptions dulled, but she heard Gan roar and jump over her. The technicians who had jumped with her from *Corona* were nowhere to be seen.

Time seemed to skip a beat, and next she knew she was dragged to her feet and thrown into thin air. She was caught by something or someone, only to feel another body slam into her a moment later. She opened her eyes and could see only a bloody haze. Whoever had fallen on her rolled over, grabbed her and pulled her up into a sitting position. Chieng blinked as the person next to her wiped the blood from her eyes with his hands.

“Chieng!” Gan yelled, his voice cracking.

Suddenly she could see him. Liu’s daughter lurched to her feet, pulling the ex accountant with her. The enemy vessel lurched forward beside them as the *Corona* rammed her from behind a second time.

“One more,” she murmured in a slurred voice.

Chieng unclipped the last grenade from her belt, her movements languid and uncoordinated. She tried to wipe the blood which still flowed freely from her face before attempting to activate the bomb.

“Give me that for Agni’s sake!” Gan cried.
He grabbed the deadly instrument, twisted its top and threw it at one of the empty spaces in the middle of the enemy vessel where a stone plate had once rested.

“Get down!”

The device exploded before he could finish shouting his warning. The effect was catastrophic. Perfectly placed by happenstance, the blow cracked the chassis of the Earth Kingdom leviathan in three unequal pieces. Gan shielded the slight engineer with his body as they were showered with fist sized chunks of granite.

The rock train, or at least the huge pieces it had broken into, immediately lost speed and began to flip end over end as the earthbenders propelling her lost control. Gan and Chieng watched in horror as the Corona swerved out of the way of the flaming wreck, only for the largest piece to fly square off the road and slam head long into the Nova and the last enemy rock sled which had been paralleling her. Both were destroyed instantly in a huge orange flower of flame and death as Nova’s boilers and naptha reserves exploded upon impact.

Gan closed his eyes, sicken at the loss, the wind tousling his dark hair.

He looked down at his superior, blood still flowing from the ugly cut on her head.

“You okay?”

She did not respond at first, transfixed by the rapidly expanding black mushroom cloud falling away behind them.

“He better… be alive… when we get there… god dammit,” she breathed.

Gan stiffened at the thought of arriving too late to help his friend and at the realization that the Nova had just paid the price for his gambit.

Then, realizing what he needed to do, he replied in a comforting tone, “Damn right, Commander, he better be – or we’ll kill him, all right?”

She smiled weakly as he struggled to bring her below deck.

The column rocketed south, leaving behind many dead who would never be buried.
Night had fallen. Another frustrating day of brutal combat had passed.

General Nifong, dirty and exhausted, pored once more over the campaign map spread on the ground. A shielded lantern cast a dim light, barely enough to see by. The young captain pointed at the rough markings that had just been added to the chart by a couple of young staffers who hovered at its edge.

“Prince Iroh’s counterattack halted our advance right before sunfall,” the adjutant reported in a sullen tone, “I don’t think we can stage another attack before morning. By that time they’ll have been reinforced with more of Tien Shin’s troops – and probably those tank trains that cut through our lines this afternoon.”

“Yes,” Nifong sighed, “I agree, and I don’t think we want to make another attempt on their center anyway.”

“Why not?”

Nifong looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching. Two older officers appeared and waited patiently at the edge of the map for their leader to acknowledge them. He turned back to answer his adjutant’s question.

“They are focusing all their attention there now. You can understand why, can’t you? If we had succeeded in breaking them there today the outcome would be assured despite their remarkable success so far. Having come so close they will expect us to try again tomorrow. We must disappoint them.”

He looked up again at the two newcomers.

“You’re sure about Tien Shin’s position, Colonel?”

“Yes, General,” the thin man replied, pointing to their south and west, “We drove him off the Hue Road, but we suffered heavy losses killing off the last of their tanks. The attack stalled and both sides held up to reorganize. Tien Shin’s command tent and battle flags were visible from the road right about… the infantry officer got down on one knee and pointed to a location on the map, “here by late in the afternoon.”

“We heard reports of a sparky?” the adjutant prompted.

“Yes, that’s definitely true.”

“Did we get him?”

“Not sure, the whole situation had gone straight to hell by that point.”

“What about the dreadnoughts?” the aide continued, “Did you see them?”
“Oh yes, they smashed through one of our supply columns then crossed the Hue Road over to Fire Nation lines through a gap in our own. No idea why – they could have done a lot more damage than they did. I guess our rock sleds couldn’t stop them?”

“They got rid of one,” the young officer replied grimly, “but they weren’t prepared to attack and had to wing it when the enemy suddenly appeared out of nowhere.”

“A brave effort,” Nifong observed, “but a failure nonetheless.”

“Did any of ours survive?”

“No, none.”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Nifong concluded with a dismissive wave of his hand, “What’s important is that as the Fire Nation front shortens their southern flank has to thin out or shift north in order for them to close ranks at their center.”

“You propose an attack on their southern flank then, sir?” the other officer speculated.

Nifong nodded in reply.

“Why not the northern flank, General?” the thin colonel asked, “We heard Iroh’s left that girl in charge up there, the daughter of that old slave driver T’Zan. She’s no soldier.”

“Why not?” the aging general retorted with a trace of contempt, “Because unlike you, Colonel Hu, I don’t underestimate her. If I knew her to be a fool I’d have attacked Mequon long ago. Let’s just say there are reasons she succeeded her father.”

Hu’s expression registered his doubt.

“You don’t believe that witch talk, do you? All she did was kill her old man and take his place. The whole fire spitter nobility is like that – thieves and robbers.”

The rest of the group considered this. Governor T’zan’s reputation had preceded her. Whispers from dark corners claimed the young woman had murdered her elderly father using the blackest of arts. Earth Kingdom intelligence had confirmed the elder T’zan had been murdered, but were uncertain of anything else.

For his own part, Nifong was unsure. He had met her once, years before at prisoner exchange, where she had been sent as her father’s legate. There he had witnessed the burning intelligence in her eyes, the power of her personality and her skills of persuasion. He knew then that this person would someday drive the course of events in ways that few could predict or understand.

“I don’t know what to believe, Colonel,” Nifong replied dully, “and it hardly matters. The bottom line is that the weakness is developing on the southern flank, not the northern and the disposition of our forces makes an attack there far more practical than elsewhere.”

“Shall I issue the orders then, sir?”

“Yes, Captain, we must be in position by sunrise.”

“What about the reinforcements?” Colonel Hu continued, unruffled by the rebuffs he had met with so far in the conversation.

“No word, sir,” the adjutant answered, “We’ve heard nothing from the east for more than a day.”
“No word from Master Wu-Ti either,” one of the young staffers observed, fear audible in her voice.

Hu crossed his arms at this, his expression turning suspicious.

“Is it possible the Council is letting us sink, General? Ordering everyone behind us to just back off?”

“No,” Nifong replied instantly, his tone sharp, “I don’t believe that. They’ve denied reinforcements, cut supplies, all of that, but never outright betrayal.”

The evil possibility nevertheless hung in the air. Fear spread cold and deadly amongst them.

“What does it matter anyway?” the other officer injected bitterly, “Even if they sent reinforcements or if the Ningbo garrison set out immediately, they’d never get here in time to affect the outcome.”

“Correct,” the weary general affirmed. He had said as much when the idea of asking the Council for help had first been offered. It had been a foolish hope from the beginning.

The victor of Lake Myojin stood, followed swiftly by the others. The young captain motioned to the staffers to roll up the map. Someone doused the lamp.

“Get a move on those orders, Captain,” Nifong reiterated before turning to the surly colonel, “You’re in charge of the redeployment, Hu. Make it happen.”

“Yes, sir!” Hu responded, snapping stiffly to attention and saluting.

Nifong mounted a nearby ostrich horse and prepared to leave.

“Where are you headed, General?” the adjutant asked in some alarm.

“East, I want to see what’s going on in our rear – I don’t like this.”

“Shouldn’t I come with you, sir, I can get these…”

“No, you coordinate the redeployment with Colonel Hu. I will return to Southern Command before sunrise.”

Emotions warred on the young man’s face and he was unable to reply.

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Nifong continued with a wry smile, “We’ll face our destiny tomorrow shoulder to shoulder, whatever it may be, I promise you.”

The Earth Kingdom hero kicked his horse into a trot and disappeared into the darkness.

Iroh woke with a start. He had snatched a few hours sleep after the last bout of combat, but the nightmares of Sad Hill had robbed him of any real rest. He doubted whether he would ever sleep through the night again. He was unsure, but he assumed there were only a few hours left before sunrise.

Every part of his body ached, but he barely registered the pain. Around him he could the moans and cries of the wounded. The dull thudding of Tien Shin’s artillery echoed near at hand.

After a ferocious cavalry duel in the late afternoon, Iroh’s outnumbered forces had been supported by Tien Shin’s vanguard approaching from the southwest. Between them and the heavy ranged
weapons, the gap between the two ragged pieces of the Fire Nation army had been closed.

Behind him the Constellation was under emergency repair. One of her treads had slipped off and her forward siphon had been severely damaged by an earthbending attack. Steam still escaping her vents whispered on the night air. Backlit by the flaming projectiles from Tien Shin’s catapults she looked like a sleeping dragon.

His exhilaration and euphoria from earlier in the day had vanished, replaced once again by fear, anger and doubt that gnawed incessantly at the edges of his mind. They had blunted the enemy advance, but the price he had paid was high.

Iroh sat up and brought his knees to his chin. He knew the position was unflattering. If anyone came upon him they would think he was acting like a scared, lost child.

He looked up at the stars overhead, cold, distant, and beautiful. He remembered his final, bitter conversation with his cousin a lifetime ago on the edge of the Dune Sea. Xian had spoken softly of his memories of his own father and his famous Battle of the Coral Sea. All Iroh had known for certain at the time was that he was losing the man he had loved most, the elder brother he would have chosen. Now he knew what his cousin’s words about his father had really meant.

“I used to dream of him on the bridge that night, looking at the stars, trying to make the best decision he could in such an awful situation… Your father and mine became heroes, just as they should have been. But that night… that night… they were just as afraid and vulnerable as we are now…”

The Crown Prince squeezed back tears as his cousin’s voice echoed in his thoughts. Now, he was alone, as alone as Xian had been, or their fathers before them. The very same stars shined in the sky, but they provided no comfort, as they had provided no comfort to Xian or his father before him. The distant, cold pinpoints of light stood silent witnesses to all their struggles and heartaches without thought, insight or understanding. They could tell him nothing.

He alone had committed the army to the awful risks they had taken. Tens of thousands of Fire Nation soldiers had already paid the price with their lives. Weakened and exhausted, he could feel the Army of the Great Divide struggling around him to ward off final destruction. The surprise had been complete, the technology had worked spectacularly, but he now realized, with mounting horror, that these would not be enough to save them.

Yes, the message of deliverance had come, but would they survive long enough to profit from it? He did not know. The hope and certainty of the morning had dissolved into a chasm of despair and uncertainty. Visions of defeat had swiftly replaced the images of a triumph. He saw the ragged survivors of his army shackled to each other in chains, marching east in filthy rags to the prison camps of the enemy. In his mind the smoking ruins of Mequon loomed high in the shadows of night, the banners of the Earth King flapping in the breeze.

He found to his shame he preferred these thoughts to those of his friends, and he preferred all of these to thoughts of the raven haired engineer. Anger and fear warred in his heart at the thought of Corona flying head long into the heart of Nifong’s army.

Agni Almighty, please… please keep her safe… let me pay the price for my mistakes… not her…

The prayer contained a stinging reproach, the bitter harbinger of guilt and regret. Dimly he recalled Tien Shin’s warning when he had returned from Lake Myojin to find Iroh in command and suspected his hated elder brother had been right.
The certainty that he would live through the defeat that yawned wide before him only made him feel worse. He knew that if his army, his friends and the woman he loved lost their lives in this awful place, he would wear the chains that awaited him willingly, and that he would not long survive the assumption of the exile Rhiannon had foreseen.

Tears escaped and ran down his cheek. Salty and bitter, he could not stop them.

He quickly wiped away the evidence of his shame as he heard footsteps rapidly approaching. Standing up he was almost knocked over by a messenger. Dimly he wondered how anyone knew where to find him before remembering he’d told the Constellation’s Chief Boiler Operator where he intended to crash.

“Yes, soldier, what is it?” Iroh replied a bit gruffly, transferring some of the anger at his own weakness unfairly, he knew, onto the runner.

“Sir! I bring a message from Commander Shiung!”

Without thinking Iroh raised his fist wreathed in flame to illuminate his visitor. He was filthy and had obviously ridden hard for many hours. The Crown Prince grabbed his shoulder and twisted the fabric of his uniform so he could clearly see the patch it bore. The Spaceship and Sun emblazoned on the patch plainly identified him as a crewmember of the Corona.

“How is she!? Is she okay!? Where is she!? Tell me!” he demanded, the questions pouring out in quick succession, the flames in his hands growing with his anger.

“I don’t know, General,” the messenger replied in a terrified voice, “I swear! The Chief gave me the message!”

“What’s going on? What’s happening!? Why did she order the tank trains to cross enemy lines!?”

The questions came rapid fire. He knew the terrified messenger was unlikely to have answers, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I don’t know, sir! Honest! All I know is we had a hell of a time crossing the enemy rear, your Highness, and we lost Nova, but the rest of us made it through!”

“What about Gan? I mean Captain Shu?” he corrected.

“I don’t know, sir, but I do know Inferno survived okay.”

Iroh let out the breath he did not realize he had been holding and forced himself to calm down. It was hard.

“All right, soldier, what is the message?”

The runner produced a scroll case and handed it over. Iroh reduced his flames to provide just enough light for him to read.

The message, written in what he instantly recognized as Chieng’s neat, disciplined hand contained a message that struck fear he had never known into his heart. It read simply,

“Come – hurry.”

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. He could feel it. What it was, he didn’t know.

He hesitated only a second before acting. He knew he should stop and think, consider the facts and
then make a reasoned decision in the best interest of the army and the Fire Nation. He could hear the wise counsels Xian and Rhiannon in the back of his mind, but he could not make out the words. They were drowned in the blackness and heat of his fear and anger.

He grabbed the messenger by the collar and pulled him close to his face.

“Do you know where she is now?” he questioned in a low, dangerous voice.

“Yes! Yes, sir!”

“Show me! Show me now!” he thundered.

He dragged the runner to the Constellation and once inside threw him at the operations table. The pens, instruments and straight edges that littered the campaign map jostled as the unfortunate young man slammed into its edge. The bridge crew and the elder “map buddy” looked up in surprise at the sudden, violent appearance of their superior.

“Show me!” he commanded once more.

Shaking, the messenger looked at the map and hesitated, unnerved by the Crown Prince’s fury.

Realizing the danger, the “map buddy” stepped forward and began orienting him to the chart.

“Relax, son, I’ll explain. North is this direction, here is the Hue Road… the Silk Road… Mequon… Vyazma… and Second Corps last known positions…”

Iroh fumed at the delay. Finally the runner pointed at a location on the map.

“I think about here, sir.”

He turned to the Chief Boiler Operator, “Are the repairs done?”

“Yes, Highness!” the Chief Boiler Operator reported with more than a little fear, “Just a few minutes ago.”

“We move now,” Iroh announced.

“But, General…” the Chief began before he was silenced by a glare from Iroh that could have melted iron.

The Crown Prince stepped up to the flight deck, ordered the driver out of his chair, threw his baton of command on the dashboard, sat down and strapped himself in. Thunderstruck, the crew finally realized that Iroh intended to pilot the dreadnought himself.

Finally recovering, the Chief began shouting orders to the engineers.

“Trim vents! Fire boiler two! Increase pressure to one hundred! Now! Now! Now!”

Duplicating the movements he’d seen dozens of times, Iroh activated the running lights and released the brakes. Around him everyone took their seats and prepared for imminent departure. Before everyone was ready the young general popped the clutch, snapping the drive engines into full gear. The whole chassis yanked forward with a gut wrenching clank before settling in to a steadily increasing rate of forward motion.

The Constellation rocketed south and east under the stars and in the madness of their master’s drive none of them saw the dull red glare of signal rockets bloom on the eastern horizon.
Deng moved east on the Silk Road with a small squad of guards for protection. A canter had turned into a gallop when they had seen the red flowers bloom in the eastern sky. The foreboding that had grown every step since they had left Ningbo had turned instantly to certainty.

A messenger soon passed them at breakneck speed in the darkness that could not be flagged down despite the best efforts of the general’s party.

Half an hour later another messenger appeared who attempted to pass them as well, but was stopped by Nifong himself who grabbed the ostrich horses’ bridle and forced the animal to stop.

“Stop,” the green clad general bellowed, “I command you!”

“Who are you!?” the young man remonstrated, “I have urgent news that can’t be delayed, idiot!”

“I am General Nifong.”

The messenger peered at the powerfully muscled man who held his mount at bay. Recognition spreading across his features in an instant, he grimaced and saluted.

“Forgive me, most noble General,” the young man begged, “I have an urgent message from Seventh Division!”

“What is it?”

“Signal flares, sir! Red ones! Multiple sightings up and down the rear! Fifth Division reported them too!”

“Yes,” Nifong agreed, “We saw them.”

“No enemy contact yet,” the messenger continued, “but Colonel Dao believes we somehow have Fire Nation forces behind us!”

No supplies and no reinforcements in more than a day, his adjutant had said. Nifong could hear the steel trap snapping shut around him.

“What do we do now, General?” one of his guards asked.

“We finish what we started. We will see for ourselves what Fate has in store for us.”

They set off again at a hard gallop.

His party reached the rear command center less than an hour before sunrise. The steppes to the east remained dark and silent, but Nifong knew this was deceptive. Swinging down from his mount he handed the reins to attendants who darted out of the operations tent. Around it dozens of other tents had been erected and in the open area around them lay hundreds of crates and stacks of supplies of every conceivable kind.

Just beyond the camp a neat line of artillery had been patiently awaiting transport to the western front. Now, crews of supply chain workers worked feverishly to turn the machines around to face the opposite direction.

He asked startled sentries for the camp commandant and after receiving proper direction arrived on foot at one of the nearby catapults. There two officers were overseeing the stacking of ammunition
for the artillery. Both started at the unexpected sight of their legendary commanding officer. The expressions of shock quickly changed to relief.

“General! Did you receive our messages?” began one, a squat, plump woman wearing infantry armor.

“Yes, Colonel,” he replied, “Do we have any scout reports?”

She shook her head.

“No, sir, I sent a dozen scouts east and south as soon as we saw the flares. Half returned having seen nothing. The other half didn’t return at all.”

Nifong had produced his sight glass and swept the horizon. All was hidden in darkness. The shallow depressions between the low rolling hills of the steppe could hide large numbers of the enemy. He lowered his instrument and turned to the other officer.

“When did the last supply column arrive, Commander?”

“Yesterday morning, General, we were supposed to receive another last night, but it never came. I sent messengers to you and to Master Wu-Ti at army group headquarters, but they’re east of us so…”

The camp commandant let the sentence trail off.

“I don’t understand, sir,” the woman continued, “What’s going on? How can we have anyone behind us? We’ve heard horrible things about the fighting ahead, but how can they be behind us too? Where did they come from?”

Nifong blinked and paused before replying. With crushing certainty his mind suddenly alighted on the only possible answer to the question. He looked to the east and saw the sky beginning to lighten.

“I don’t know, Colonel,” he finally replied in a hushed tone, “but I’m afraid the dawn will show us the answer.”

“If they’re out there, what do we do?”

His reply was brutal as it was honest.

“We die.”

They stood silently and waited for dawn to arrive. Minutes later the sun peaked over the eastern horizon. The new day promised to be beautiful with clear skies, a westerly breeze and warm temperatures come afternoon.

Deng knew then it would be his last.

The newborn day revealed the terrifying truth. The hills behind them ran red with tens of thousands of Fire Nation soldiers, their helmets gleaming in the morning sun, the banners of General Shu and Prince Ozai snapping in the wind.

Nifong sank to his knees and closed his eyes in sorrow. Raising his arms to the sky, he bowed his head and prayed.

O Spirit of the Earth, the Enemy is upon us! Hear my cry come unto thee! By your divine grace help us break the power of our Enemy! Deliver your people, Great Spirit, from the tyranny of Azulon, help us to strike down the noonday devils, tormentors of the world!”
The old general looked up at the bloody sea flowing over the steppe towards them and knew his prayer would not be heard. He was not alone. Every green clad soldier who witnessed the spectacle knew then that the Spirit of the Earth had abandoned them.

The Army of the Song had arrived.
Chapter Summary

Iroh learns the price of victory.

The audience was silent. Gao felt their despair and shared it.

“Though the fighting was not yet finished on the morning of that fourth day, our story must
nevertheless withdraw from the bloody affair of combat and bid farewell to the clash of armies and
the organized destruction of war. This tale, I might remind you, is the life of Prince Iroh, and now the
stage must shrink in the scale and scope to focus now on the players and their fates after the infamous
slaughter at Mequon.”

“Yes, most noble guests,” the old storyteller continued in a devastated voice, “Now we must lay to
rest the Earth Kingdom’s greatest hero in a generation, the likes of whom we have not seen since, for
with the arrival of General Shu and Prince Ozai the Army of the Granite Mountains was doomed.
Surrounded on all sides, the valiant soldiers of the Earth Kingdom were slain by the enemy and very
few escaped to tell the tale.”

“As for Deng Zev Nifong, he deserved a hero’s death, perhaps in single combat against Iroh himself,
but this was not to be. Seldom does real life allow for such poetry and this tale sadly provides no
exception. As for the great man’s final fate, let it only be said that he perished on the steppes of
Mequon just as Prince Iroh planned and though his final moments are lost to history, it cannot be
doubted that he met his end with the skill and honor for which he is justly famed.”

Few guests looked at the storyteller as he spoke. Most looked at the floor or down at their hands.

The story and the events it described had occurred thirty years before and for the greater part of the
evening the audience had been content to treat it as a matter far removed from their own experience.

Now, at the end, every guest felt the weight of the present day upon them. Though Ba Sing Se
remained unbowed, the Fire Nation had advanced in virtually every other theater. Soon, they knew
the enemy would reach them in Shanxi and there would be no Army of the Granite Mountains to
stop them.

The storyteller continued.

“Now we are come now the bitter end of our tale, my friends, and though the Battle of Mequon was
hailed as a great victory for the Fire Nation, perhaps we should consider instead whether anyone
won at all, for the devastating losses on all sides crippled the great powers for years to come.”

“Yet such weighty concerns did not prey on Prince Iroh at the conclusion of this conflict, though the
carnage and destruction was surely obvious to all who survived, for now he was consumed by the
events driving his own personal drama, events set in motion by the Fire Lord’s decisions at the
Harvest Moon feast so long ago, the very same feast with which we began this tale…”
The *Constellation*'s engines screamed in protest as Iroh slammed on the brakes. He had piloted the ship for hours and it was now midday. After several wrong turns prompted by Iroh’s inexperience and refusal to yield the driver’s seat to those who knew better, they had finally arrived at their destination. In front of them, parked in a neat line, *Constellation*'s sisters seemed to wait patiently for her arrival. A series of nearby tents flew the banners of Tien Shin.

Sweat poured from Iroh’s brow, but not from the engine heat which had rapidly turned the atmosphere of the bridge into a blast furnace. Chieng’s laconic instruction tormented him.

“This – hurry.”

This was all she had said. Was she hurt? Dying? She had at least been well enough to write, and though he took some comfort in the thought, it did little to assuage the sense of impending doom that had washed over him like a cold tidal wave upon receipt of her message. Whatever it was, it was important enough for her to demand his presence… and too sensitive to actually address it openly. This realization terrified him most of all.

He thought briefly of Gan and Nikon. The accountant, pushed into a battlefield command role for which he had not been trained, was closest physically to her and was therefore the likeliest cause for concern if she herself was unhurt. Nikon, his best friend, had all but disappeared. Exposed in one of the riskiest parts of their plan, he knew the young commoner was most likely to have paid the price for Iroh’s daring.

Still, it was for the woman he loved that he feared most and he prayed above all for her safety. Against his will he thought wildly of whose lives he would trade to keep her whole. He thrust these evil and unworthy sentiments from his mind over and over. He knew full well that had no control over what had already happened when he had not been present, but the crushing pressure of his anxiety over many hours of travel had allowed them to invade his thoughts with disturbing frequency.

The *Constellation* slowed to a stop. Before he knew it he had exited the ship at a dead run. Dimly he was aware that he raced towards *Corona* and some corner of his mind registered that the dreadnought had recently sustained major damage. He did not notice that the makeshift camp seemed unnaturally subdued for an army at war. Sentries kept watch to the east and and men manned the siphons on top of each leviathan.

Iroh’s heart and mind raced as the hatch on the side of Chieng’s machine opened. Relief flooded through him as the slight engineer sprang graceful as a dancer from the opening and sprinted towards him. Her hair had escaped her braid and flew wildly about her shoulders as she ran. Others followed behind her, but he saw only the object of his care.

Without thought or conscious decision Iroh caught her in his arms and, dissipating her forward momentum with a surprisingly graceful half pirouette, kissed her soundly on the lips. She did not stiffen or try to escape, but instead wrapped her arms about him and returned his greeting as enthusiastically as he gave it.

When he opened his eyes and released her he realized they had both sunk to their knees. He looked her over as if afraid she was an illusion, cupping her face with his calloused hands.
“I have come,” he said simply.

Chieng met her lord’s gaze and found herself unable to deny the devotion that burned there. She blinked and kissed him again. The moment stretched and Iroh wished nothing more than it would go on forever.

Suddenly they were aware of an audience. Most of Corona’s bridge crew had stepped out and were now standing in a semicircle around them. Firestorm’s main hatch had opened and Chief Tang had emerged with several others. They each slowly turned their heads in the opposite direction to look at the newcomers. Scanning the faces around them they saw a mixture of shock, awe and amusement in their expressions.

“Oh, how adorable!” Tang gushed, her hand flying to her mouth.

One bystander stood out as the exception. Gan looked down at them with a slack jaw and no trace of mirth.

Iroh felt heat rising in his cheeks, but decided it was far too late to worry about public embarrassment. Ignoring the gawkers he turned back to Chieng.

“Are you all right?” he inquired in a tender voice.

She nodded her head, but did not reply. He saw the wound on her forehead and moved to touch it, but stopped himself.

“What happened?”

“It’s nothing.”

He looked into her golden eyes and saw fear and sadness growing in them. The relief he had felt began to wane. He turned to Gan.

“Gan?”

“I’m okay, Iroh,” he replied, his expression stony.

“Then…”?

He swung round wildly, quickly scanning the faces around him once more. The one he sought now was not there. Suddenly everyone’s expression matched Gan’s. Even Tang looked down in despair. He looked back to Chieng and was shocked to see tears beginning to stream down her face. She tried to squeeze her eyes shut to stop them, but this only made them come faster.

Iroh stood up, his face frozen in expression of dawning horror.

“Where… where is Nikon?” he breathed.

She stood and forced herself to look into his eyes once more.

“What’s… what’s happened?” he pleaded, his voice beginning to break, “Please, you have to tell me!”

“He… he saved us, Iroh, he saved us all…”

“What do you mean?” he demanded, his voice becoming harsh, “Where is he?”
She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Answer me!” he thundered.

He received no reply. She looked at him mutely, tears flowing freely. Iroh turned in anger and frustration to Gan who met the dark apparition of his friend with an impassive stare.

“Answer me!” he repeated.

Gan held his gaze for a moment more, an expression of empathy spreading over his features, before he stepped aside to once again reveal the open hatch of Corona.

He was running again. Despair and hopelessness threatened to swallow him as the world began to spin. He heard galloping feet behind him, but could not tell whether it was people following him or the blood pounding in his ears. Time seemed to skip and the next thing he remembered he was standing in the doorway between the engineering deck and Chieng’s ready room.

The room was shrouded in semi darkness. A few oil lamps burned on Chieng’s desk and one on the tea dolly he remembered from what seemed a different age of the world.

On the floor a body rested on a pallet. The soldier wore the basic issue maroon tunic and pants. He wore no armor. His head was heavily bandaged obscuring his eyes. The rags were soaked through with both fresh and congealed blood.

The body did not move.

Two women knelt beside the litter. One was Kanjana. The other he did not recognize. Both looked up in response to the sound of Iroh’s sudden appearance. The unfamiliar one was a young soldier who looked at Iroh with anger and despair to match his own. The doctor had just finished writing something on a scroll. She snapped it shut and put it in a bag beside her. She stood and met his eyes with an expression of grim acknowledgment.

Kanjana nodded once at the unspoken question and backed away from the body to allow Iroh access.

The Crown Prince ran to his friend’s side and dropped to the floor.

“No!” he cried through tears which suddenly sprang forth in an uncontrollable flood, “You can’t be! No, no, Great Agni! I forbid it!”

He grabbed his friend’s hand and with the other removed the bandage enough to see the smashed remains of his head. Iroh recoiled as if struck.

“No!” he moaned in agony, “Oh Agni, no, please no!”

Iroh turned to look up at the doctor, his eyes huge, his expression haunted.

“Please, Lady Kanjana! Help him! Please!”

Chieng and Gan had entered the room. Gan stood behind him while Chieng knelt down and took Iroh’s free hand in hers. He squeezed it reflexively, as if the act could somehow banish forever the image before him.

“I cannot, your Highness,” Kanjana replied quietly, placing a hand on his shoulder, “He’s already gone.”
Iroh sobbed. He released his dead friend’s hand and placed it gently over his chest. He leaned over and kissed Nikon’s blood soaked brow.

“Great Agni…” he vowed, “I will avenge you!”

He had thought losing Xian would be the worst anguish he would feel in this life. He had been wrong. With Xian there had been the agony of waiting, an unbearable tension finally broken by the crushing confirmation he had come in his heart to expect.

Here, he knew, he was a victim of his own unconscious belief in his friend’s immortality. Iroh had thought far enough ahead to give his friend instructions in the event he himself had died, but what thought had he given to this awful possibility? None. It was unimaginable. He had not allowed himself to imagine it. The pain of his cousin’s loss was still too great.

Nikon Orlando, the lucky street urchin, the valiant hero, the dashing ladies’ man… he could never die.

The lifeless body laid out before him told a different story. The world was cold, unforgiving, and indifferent to the concepts of justice, fairness, right and wrong, good and evil.

“I…I lost them both!”

Tears soon obscured his vision. His attempts to wipe them away proved futile. He did not know how long he wept. The excruciating pain of loss racked his mind in broad, sweeping convulsions that rapidly exhausted him. At some point they died down enough for him to speak in halting, childish heaves of grief.

“He never asked me for… for anything… not once. It was I who asked sacrifices of him… over and over… he never let me down... he never let us down! Never! Not once!”

Chieng squeezed his hand once again, for she knew Iroh’s observation to be true. Despite her first impression and frequent criticism, she had ultimately thought highly of Nikon and found herself wounded deeply at his passing both for her sake and for Iroh’s.

Gan walked around the pallet and knelt on the other side of Nikon, his expression hard and intense.

“He was a hero to every soldier in the Army of the Great Divide… and a worthy friend in every way… even to the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation.”

“He was, Gan,” Iroh agreed, his voice thick, “I know you loved him too.”

“I did,” the former accountant confessed, tears welling in his steel grey eyes, “and I’d have done… anything to save him.”

They were quiet for some time before Iroh spoke again.

“Oh Agni, I wish… I wish he’d waited…” then, speaking directly to his daimyo, continued, “You didn’t wait, damn you…”

Iroh turned to face the doctor once more.

“When?”

“About a half hour ago, your Highness.”

He closed his eyes and grabbed Chieng’s hand with both of his and felt sure he was going to crush
her bones.

So close, oh dear god… so close…

He opened his eyes, wiped them once more, looked back and forth between Gan and Chieng and then back at Nikon.

“Was he… was he in pain? Did he… did he feel it, do you think?”

Kanjana shook her head.

“No, I don’t think so, General. He never woke up after the injury,” she once more laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, “I know it’s no comfort, but you did not miss a farewell.”

Iroh rocked back and forth, tears flowing down now well-traveled, salty channels on his cheeks.

“How?” he finally continued, his voice still thick, “What happened?”

Kanjana withdrew her hand from his shoulder and pointed at the young soldier across from them whom Iroh had seen but then ignored when he had entered the room.

“She knows.”

The Crown Prince refocused on the young woman. Her uniform and insignia identified her as a tanker, her bearing marked her as a veteran, but it was her dark eyes, burning with pain and desire for revenge that marked her both a survivor of Lake Myojin and a friend of Nikon. She had ignored everything since he’d entered. Her eyes had never moved from her commander’s blood soaked head. He could see the devastation writ large on her face. It mirrored his own.

“What’s your name?”

“Leng, your Highness.”

She replied without looking at him. Under any other circumstance this would have been a major offense. Had Nikon been alive he would have disciplined her severely on the spot for such a breach, but he was not. The loss shared was so great that not one of them in the room even saw an insult.

“How did you know him?”

“I… was… one of his tank drivers.”

“How long… how long did you serve with him?”

“Since Cam’ron, sir.”

“What happened… what happened to him?”

Tonelessly she related the story of Fifth Brigade’s last stand. Her eyes burned hot with hatred, but she soon joined her superiors with streams of salty tears as she bared her soul to them. Outside, as if on cue, the sounds battle began to filter through the leviathan’s metal hull. The dull thudding of Earth Kingdom artillery grew louder as she continued her tale, acting as a somber and haunting score for the grim fate of her commander.

“He was held down by two dirties when I saw three more get ready to earthbend. Cowards! Filthy cowards,” she snarled, “None of them could take him alone! They had to kill him like… like a pack of hyena vultures! I killed one and shot the stone out from another… but…but… I couldn’t… that
last one… the one I couldn’t stop…”

She broke down and began to sob. Iroh looked on the young tank driver in sympathy. Unconsciously echoing his opponent, he did his best to comfort her.

“There is no shame, soldier, you did everything that could be done.”

“If only… if only,” she continued, her voice thick with grief, “If only Prince Tien Shin had hit the last one… he was so close…”

Iroh froze. He had forgotten entirely about his hated step brother. Now the grief that had shrouded the room suddenly evaporated, replaced by tension so intense it mimicked the tremendous electric potential created before a lightning bolt.

All eyes turned to Iroh.

“Explain,” Iroh commanded, his voice suddenly frigid.

Leng looked up from her vigil for the first time, hearing the sudden change in tone.

“Sir?” she questioned in confusion, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“What do you mean… about Tien Shin?”

“He was there, your Highness. He got there right at the end… he shot an arrow at the… the murderer,” she spat the word out like she had named a demon, “but he missed.”

Iroh turned to Gan and Chieng before turning back to the young tank driver.

“Tien Shin… missed?”

Leng did not fail to miss the importance of the question. She considered her answer before giving it.

“Yes, General, I saw his Highness shoot down a few other dirties, but he missed the one that mattered.”

Iroh’s jaw tightened, his face twisting in rage.

“No, Iroh, wait!” Gan implored, but it was too late. Iroh had risen and left the room before she had finished her sentence.

Chieng and the former accountant rushed after him.

“Iroh, stop!” Chieng commanded his rapidly retreating form.

The Crown Prince ignored them as he exited the leviathan that had become his friends’ tomb and raced toward the largest tent displaying the banner of his hated rival. The sound of approaching battle had become a roar and two boulders landed in quick succession around him. They disintegrated into a hail of fragments and dust. Iroh ignored them and continued his mindless charge.

He burst into the tent to see Tien Shin standing over his campaign desk reading a scroll. A campaign map and dozens of papers, scroll cases and small wooden chests completely obscured its surface. He was attended by several officers including Commander Tojo and several newly arrived messengers. He was in the middle of an intense back and forth with his audience and none of them marked the entrance of the Crown Prince. A dozen lower level servants dashed around the tent trying to pack everything up into crates and storage containers.
“Yes!” the elder prince confirmed, “Issue the evacuation code! This is their last push, we have to survive it!”

“I’ll hold the road until nightfall, Highness,” Tojo vowed.

“You must! Go now! We’ll regroup and press –”

Tien Shin was unable to finish the sentence when, to his utter shock, Iroh vaulted over the desk, thrust Tojo rudely out of the way and placed his hands in a chokehold around his neck. Blinded by rage, the Crown Prince failed even to ignite his fists in flame, preferring instead the animal satisfaction of squeezing the life out of him with his powerfully muscled arms.

“You killed him, you son of a bitch!” Iroh screamed as he shook the object of his rage like a rag doll.

The whole tent froze in horror at the sudden and totally unexpected turn of events. Caught unprepared, the elder prince stared in wide eyed shock at the furious man trying to strangle him. Tien Shin beat furiously, but in vain at hands holding him in an iron grip.

“I’m going to kill you, you… you filthy bastard!”

Gan and Chieng rushed into the tent to see Iroh choking his step brother. Everyone spoke and began moving at once, creating a scene of total confusion. The newcomers repeated their shouted warnings to Iroh while Tojo and two of the nearby servants attempted to save their master by prying him loose from Iroh’s hold.

Chieng reached Iroh before Gan. She appeared at his side, took a deep breath and spoke calmly into his ear.

“Iroh, no, not this way.”

“He let them kill him,” he rasped through gritted teeth.

“This won’t bring him back,” she pointed out gently, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Suddenly, his chest heaving with anger and hatred, Iroh released his grip. The elder prince fell to the floor, gasping for air, but was unable to draw breath. Tojo helped his commander back to his feet as two more messengers entered the tent only to stop short on seeing the extraordinary situation.

Outside, the sounds of battle had grown to a deafening roar. The siphons on the surrounding tank trains had begun pouring out jets of flaming naptha. Wherever the enemy was, they were close.

Iroh ignored the situation around them, maintaining his laser focus on the man he blamed for Nikon’s fall.

“Are you satisfied, “brother!” Have you gloated enough over his death!? Or did you waste no time on the smashed body of a wretched animal!??”

“What the hell are you talking about!?” Tien Shin finally roared in reply once he recovered his breath.

“What am I talking about!? My friend is dead, you son of a bitch!”

Still clutching his throat, Tien Shin answered in fury, “You idiot! I tried to save him!”

“You let them kill him!”

“If I had wanted to kill him I’d have done it myself and long before now!” Tien Shin yelled in
response, his angular features taut with anger.

Iroh’s body tensed once more, his eyes locked on his rival’s.

“I missed, Iroh! Yes, I saw it was him! Of course I did! The recognition distracted me enough to miss! But if you think I missed on purpose, then you’re more of a fool than I thought!”

The anger drained from Tien Shin’s face as he continued, his voice turning cold and calculating once more.

“You are so damn stupid! Stop and think for once! Ask yourself, how could it possibly profit me to let him die? Did you even stop to consider that? What? Do you think I am stupid enough to believe you’d promote me again to daimyo? Are you stupid enough to believe I would serve under you as daimyo?”

“You did it… you did it because you hated him!”

“If I did it because I hated him, and I did, I don’t deny that! But if I did, why didn’t I kill her?”

Tien Shin pointed at Leng who had entered the tent behind Gan and Chieng. Iroh did not answer. He hadn’t considered this.

“No? This is stupid and you, “brother”, once again, are acting stupidly out of emotion without thinking things through! How can you expect to be Fire Lord when you can’t think anything through?”

The question hung in the air.

“You are a fool, Iroh, and if you weren’t commanding General I would arrest you now for attempted murder!”

“I am commanding General, Tien Shin, remember that!”

“Not for long if you don’t stop weeping over a dead commoner and start paying attention to finishing this battle!”

As if for emphasis a massive boulder fell through the roof of the tent, smashed apart a stack of half-filled crates and embedded itself in the ground. Tien Shin and Iroh reflexively grabbed the campaign desk to steady themselves.

“You see that?” the elder prince questioned sharply, pointing a finger at the impact, “That is the enemy! They’re coming – now!”

Tien Shin picked up a scroll tube from his desk and shook it at Iroh.

“General Shu and your brother are here! Nifong is trapped between us and the Army of the Song, just as you hoped! So what are you going to do, Iroh? Are you going to fight me? Or are you going to obey the Fire Lord and secure victory for the Fire Nation?”

Outside they could hear the sound of battle all around them. Iroh glowered, but knew his rival was right. Addressing everyone in the tent, he gave the order.

“To the leviathans, now!”

No additional prompting was needed. The tent quickly emptied as Fire Nation infantry and Earth Kingdom cavalry broke into the clearing around the tank trains. The burning naptha from the siphons
quickly filled the air with huge columns of black, oily smoke.

Iroh grabbed Tien Shin by the shoulder, unable to leave without a parting shot.

“This isn’t over “brother”! You will pay for letting him die! He was worth ten of you!”

Tien Shin batted Iroh’s hand away.

“He died with honor, Iroh, that’s all you’ll get out of me. Now focus or we will join him in death!”

A telltale whistle ended their conversation as another huge rock fell through the roof, tipping over the campaign desk and wreaking havoc on the remaining supplies.

They rushed from the tent and steeled themselves to face the dying lashes of the Army of the Granite Mountains.
All Glory Is Fleeting

Chapter Summary

Iroh is awarded a Triumph and ordered home, but he and his friends have nothing to celebrate.

The battle was over. The dead lay rotting in the sun over a battlefield that stretched a hundred leagues in every direction. Fires dotted the horizon, leaving trails of black smoke that filled the air with ash and soot. They would burn for days.

_Firestorm_ came to a halt where she had been parked not two days before when the last enemy attack had driven them from Tien Shin’s camp. His tent still stood, though obviously damaged and was now flanked by the tents flying the banners of General Shu.

Tien Shin, Tojo and Gan exited the main hatch of the leviathan. The former accountant made for General Shu’s tent while the elder prince and his subordinate began to draw off in the direction of his broken command center.

“My father will expect you,” Gan observed coolly.

“I will pay my respects, Captain,” Tien Shin replied in his most calculating tone, “when I am finished seeing to my own affairs.”

Refusing the courtesy of a salute, Gan continued on to the bright red tent bearing the familiar crest of his family.

“Is that wise, your Highness?” Tojo questioned as they approached their destination, “Why antagonize General Shu?”

“I’m not,” Tien Shin replied with a tinge of annoyance, “I need to find something, then I will debrief with General Shu. Go to him now and tell him I will come shortly.”

Tojo saluted and withdrew.

The elder prince opened the blackened flap of the tent and entered. There was the campaign desk where they had left it, tipped over with the ground covered in papers, maps and scrolls. The crates and supplies lay strewn about. Surprisingly none appeared to have been looted, but much had been smashed or broken.

A man sat by the remains of the desk reading a scroll. He stood up and looked at Tien Shin with cool and unsympathetic eyes. The elder prince halted with a start.

“Prince Ozai,” he greeted cautiously, “Your brother is fortunate indeed that you arrived in time to secure his victory.”

The younger son of Azulon regarded his step brother for a moment before replying.

“Yes, Tien Shin, as a natural born son of Agni my brother is fortunate in many ways.”
The implied insult was clear, but Tien Shin showed neither anger nor fear. Instead the elder prince scanned the area around the desk, his eyes quickly cataloging its membership. Many things were missing. He looked to what Ozai was holding.

“What do you have in your hand?” he asked in a neutral tone.

“Just a casualty list… why?” the young Prince replied innocently, dropping the scroll onto the desk in a careless gesture, “Are you missing something?”

“No,” Tien Shin responded a trifle too quickly, “I don’t think so.”

“You know, you really should take better care of your headquarters,” Ozai lectured, “All these important documents… who knows what might happen to them… could be destroyed… or fall into the wrong hands.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The two men eyed each other, the tension and hidden animosity palpable between them. Both of a kind, each knew that on their present courses they would one day face each other.

Just as the moment seemed to stretch beyond the breaking point, the tent flap snapped open and two figures entered.

“There they are!”

General Shu was built much more broadly than his second son who followed behind him. He approached the two princes with confidence that far surpassed even the most respected members of the War College. As a lord of one the great Houses this was expected.

“You both have a lot to catch up on, no doubt! I don’t think you’ve seen each other since… oh, the summer solstice two years ago?”

“Yes, General,” Tien Shin confirmed, though neither he nor Ozai broke their staring contest.

“We kept your headquarters just as we found it, Highness,” General Shu assured him, “Hit by artillery, but apparently overlooked by the enemy or…” then with a satisfied laugh, “they all got killed before they had time to loot it!”

Tien Shin turned to face father and son.

“Congratulations are in order, General,” the elder prince offered in a neutral tone, “The Army of the Song’s timely arrival is responsible for this signal victory.”

“Yes, looks like we arrived just in time. We broke our siege and headed up here as soon as we received Governor T’zan’s message.”

“Siege?” Tien Shin inquired in surprise, his eyebrows disappearing under his clipped bangs.

“We’ve spent six months in front of Omashu,” Ozai supplied.

Tien Shin folded his arms, his eyes narrowing.

“That’s almost a thousand leagues away, when did you receive the message?”

Ozai and his superior shared a quick glance.
“Almost six weeks ago,” Gan’s father finally answered with a shrug, “maybe two months even? Is it important?”

Tien Shin cast a quick glance at Gan who remained impassive.

“Not at all,” he replied with a dismissive wave, “Your victory is what is important. The Fire Lord will be pleased.”

“I beg to differ, daimyo,” the elder Shu contradicted, “This victory is General Iroh’s. His leadership and the fortitude of your soldiers prevailed. Nifong is gone and with him the Earth Kingdom’s last hope to stave off defeat.”

Tien Shin stiffened slightly at the inaccurate use of his former title. Of course General Shu wouldn’t know.

“His Highness is no longer daimyo of the Army of the Great Divide, sir,” Gan injected smoothly, “he was presumed dead after the disaster at Lake Myojin and a replacement was appointed.”

“Illegally,” Tien Shin stated matter of factly – of course Gan would offer the correction, “a decision I will take up with the Fire Lord upon our return.”

General Shu took the news in stride. Such things happened on the battlefield.

“Oh, who is daimyo then?” Ozai inquired.

Now it was Tien Shin’s turn to prosecute, a role he always relished no matter the occasion.

“A commoner of no importance or ability, Prince Ozai, such was the magnitude of the defeat at Myojin that your brother had to turn to such low born creatures for help.”

Gan’s jaw set and his expression glowered.

“Father, his Highness is mistaken,” Gan corrected sharply, “This victory is as much daimyo Orlando’s as it is General Iroh’s. It was he who delayed General Nifong’s advance long enough for you and Prince Ozai to arrive.”

The general’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Remarkable,” the elder Shu observed, “Where is he?”

The former accountant cast his eyes to the earth.

“He died in honorable combat.”

Recognition and compassion alighted on the older man’s face.

“I see,” he said sympathetically, “This was your friend wasn’t it? Master Chen’s student?”

Tien Shin smirked as Gan nodded.

“A shame. We have need of such men.”

“I don’t agree, General,” Tien Shin replied, “but it’s not important.”

Ozai cocked his head slightly to one side.
“Hmmm… why didn’t you assume command?”

The smirk vanished from the elder prince’s face as he turned back to Ozai, replaced by anger and shame.

“Your brother illegally seized control of the army while I led the survivors back from the disaster your cousin created! He refused to accept your father’s orders naming me as Xian’s successor!”

Ozai’s eyebrows rose at this.

“A serious charge, your Highness,” General Shu observed quietly.

“General Xian left written orders appointing Iroh to succeed him in the event he was killed or incapacitated,” Gan explained rapidly, “There is absolutely no –”

“Xian’s orders,” the elder prince interrupted, “even if authentic, do not take precedence over the command of the Fire Lord!”

“What, are you going to have Iroh arrested?” the dreadnought captain scoffed, “For winning a massive victory? Is that really your plan?”

“That is the Fire Lord’s decision, Gan, I at least know my place.”

“Oh, it is my father’s decision, Tien Shin,” Ozai injected in a knowing voice, “and I am sure your mother will be pleased to understand you have learned your place. The Fire Lord’s orders, if I recall, were to destroy the enemy. My brother did exactly that. I’m surprised you would try to argue with success.”

Ozai smiled threateningly, nodded once to his superior officer and exited the tent. Gan, not wanting to spend another moment with the Tien Shin, turned to his father to ask for dismissal.

“I must return to General Iroh.”

“Of course, my son, I will come soon to pay my respects to his Highness and Governor T’zan.”

Gan bowed. His father stepped forward and hugged his son.

“I’m proud of you, Captain. You have brought honor to our House and to the Fire Nation.”

Surprised, Gan nevertheless hugged him back. They released each other. Gan saluted, a gesture his father returned, and departed.

Victory was supposed to be sweet, an event to be savored, glorified and remembered. As a child Iroh had fantasized endlessly of fighting huge battles for the Fire Nation, of winning the war his grandfather had started and his father had prosecuted with such success.

How different the actual experienced had proved. The fires had burned out long since, but the battlefield of Mequon would bear the scars of the slaughter for a hundred years. Iroh had toured the steppe with Rhiannon in the weeks since the fighting ended and had seen the destruction first hand. Yes, the victory was complete, but the cost had been higher than Iroh ever thought possible.

Nifong was dead, but there was no celebration. His body had been recovered and, at Iroh’s orders, buried according to Earth Kingdom custom under a granite monolith where he fell. He knew Xian
would have done the same and in this small way he wanted to honor his cousin’s memory.

Iroh sat in his curule chair surrounded by his friends. A black scroll tube lay on the table beside him. There was no laughter or mirth. Each was lost in their own gloomy prisons of the mind.

“Well, this was to be expected,” Rhiannon offered after Iroh had read it to them.

“Yes,” Iroh agreed quietly.

“Do we come with you?” Gan piped in.

“Yes.”

“What about me?” the governor asked in a tense voice.

“No mention of you, Rae, so it’s probably best if you stay… for your own sake if not for the province’s. We’ll just hope another black scroll doesn’t show up for you.”

Rhiannon considered this briefly, then visibly relaxed, nodded and looked down at her hands.

“May I have permission to remain as well, General?”

Iroh looked up with a jerk to face the source of the unexpected question.

“Why, Chieng? Why… would you want to stay?”

The hurt in his voice was well masked, but nevertheless did not escape notice.

“The fortifications of Mequon must be rebuilt and the tank trains need complete overhauls.”

Iroh shook his head.

“Others can candle those tasks. You must return to the capital and accept credit for your accomplishments.”

Chieng fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable.

“But –”

“Forget it, Chieng,” Gan butted in, “If we’re going, you’re going.”

The slight engineer drew breath to object once again, but was cut off.

“Iroh may need your help back home, Commander,” Rhiannon offered laconically.

All eyes refocused instantly on the governor.

“What do you mean?” the engineer queried in a low voice.

“I just think… I think Tien Shin may yet prove a problem.”

“The Fire Lord would never betray his first born son,” Chieng scoffed, but worry showed in her eyes, “The idea is preposterous.”

“Betray?” Rhiannon answered, “No, but based on what Gan said earlier about Tien Shin questioning the timing of my message to Gan’s father… I’m worried.”
No one offered a reply. Rhiannon wrung her hands.

Chieng had been initiated into Rhiannon’s secret after Gan had barged in that day to recount the conversation in question. Had the raven haired engineer been left unaware of the exotic governor’s talents she would have dismissed such concerns. After few moments to consider the governor’s words, however, she reconsidered.

“I withdraw the request.”

Satisfied, Iroh turned to the captain of the Inferno.

“What about the other communication?”

Gan handed him the scroll tube he had been holding in his hand. It was already open. Gan had read it, but despite its tidings found no enjoyment.

The young general looked down impassively at the scroll tube in his hands. He recognized its’ provenance instantly. Anyone from the Fire Nation capital would. The cheap, papery covering and the balsa wood stopper revealed it as a copy of one of the daily news rags that was sold in every marketplace each morning for a copper.

“It came with the order from your Father to return home,” Gan supplied in a subdued tone.

Iroh handed it back.

“Read it to me then… I can’t. I just… can’t.”

Gan eyes brimmed once again, but he held back the tears. He removed the scroll and read it aloud.

**VICTORY AT MEQUON!**

*Fire, the Superior Element, has triumphed! The capital has just received word from Imperial Governor T’zan that Crown Prince Iroh, having taken absolute command of the Army of the Great Divide after the disaster at Lake Myojin, has inflicted a crushing defeat against the enemy outside the mighty fortress of Mequon.*

*In a feat unrivalled in history, General Iroh led his army across the dreaded Dune Sea and surprised the Earth Kingdom’s vaunted General Nifong on the steppe lands east of Mequon. Over four days of fighting, the Army of the Great Divide, joined by General Shu, Prince Ozai and the mighty Army of Song, inflicted over 90,000 casualties against the enemy. All reports indicate that the Army of the Granite Mountains, smashed between the two Fire Nation armies, has been totally destroyed and that General Nifong himself is believed to have perished during the battle.*

*The people of the Fire Nation promptly broke out in spontaneous celebration at the news of the victory, many crying out in joy that our Nation’s humiliation at the cursed lake had been justly avenged by the most noble Prince.*

*The capital was instantly awash in rumors that a triumph would be awarded General Iroh for this glorious victory. The last triumph was celebrated sixteen seasons ago by Field Marsh Jeong Jeong for his victory at the Battle of Shi’Lo. The suspense, however, did not last long. This morning the War College decreed a triumph for General Iroh, and the Fire Lord, rejoicing in the honor won by a*
“That’s enough,” Iroh commanded.

Gan put a hand on his friend’s shoulder and Iroh accepted it. He squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to hold back the tears that threatened to unman him once again.

“They aren’t even mentioned. They risked their lives and lost… we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for them… their names aren’t even spoken… is honest defeat against a skilled and noble enemy so shameful? Is dying for the Fire Lord such a crime that one’s name should be expunged from history? I can’t… I can’t bear this.”

Chieng knelt before him and took his hands in hers. He looked into her golden eyes, filled with sorrow.

“Accept this, my lord, please… celebrate their lives,” she pleaded, “Prince Xian and bless him, that fool Nikon, earned it. The thousands of our comrades who shared their fate earned it. Remember that young man who saved your life at Nomura?”

Iroh felt a wave of shame. He had completely forgotten that young man, almost a child, who had sacrificed his life for him during the surprise attack on his headquarters so long ago. Chieng had almost dismissed his sacrifice then, but she had remembered it and he had not.

He squeezed her hands and nodded.

“Yes, that child earned it,” she confirmed, turning unexpectedly to an urgent and formal mode of address, “All glory is fleeting, my lord, but we may give thanks to Agni that the sacrifices of the fallen weren’t wholly in vain. Let us remember them and be happy that we could share our lives with them for the time that we did. Isn’t that a blessing worth celebrating?”

She let the question hang for a moment while she searched his eyes.

“You have won a tremendous victory for the Fire Nation,” she continued, “Stand tall and proud in your chariot during your triumph, General, for it has been nobly won.”

Tears ran down his cheeks. He could not stop them. Nodding once he raised her hands to his lips and kissed them. She was wonderful and he loved her.

The shrunken circle of friends broke to prepare for the long journey back to the Fire Nation.

Soft rains had come to Mequon. Transports of every conceivable kind choked the Yangtze in preparation to transport the Army of the Great Divide to Yu Dao where they would transfer to the great naval vessels for the journey home.

Iroh and Rhiannon stood on the dock.

“I should come with you.”

“No,” he disagreed with a shake of his head, “You are better off here.”

She wrung her hands.
“Protecting you is more important than avoiding him!”

“You don’t know that you can protect me, Rae,” he protested, “No matter what we do we’ll be wrong, so whatever is going to happen to me I want to at least know you’re safe!”

“I’m such a coward! I hate it!” she cried, burying her face in her hands.

He caught her in a crushing bear hug.

“Stop it! Stop it now!” he commanded, “I won’t let you run yourself down like this! You aren’t a coward! You and Xian taught me how to be brave, don’t you remember?”

“That was long ago.”

“Yes, but it’s true!” he whispered urgently into her ear, “Just as true that your gift, as much as you hate it – for good reason, I know – saved not only your colony but the entire Fire Nation! The Army of the Song would never have arrived in time otherwise! You kept your head and led the army to victory when I ran off in madness! You are good and brave, and I will protect you! As you have protected me!”

“Yes, you will,” she agreed, “though you will pay a price.”

“Gladly will I pay,” he vowed, his voice thick.

They released each other.

Iroh boarded the transport and the crew rapidly untied the moorings. The boat slid out of its berth and gathered speed as it moved into the current. Neither said goodbye nor lifted a hand in farewell. They had already lost more than they could bear. Each watched the other as they grew smaller in the other’s eye, only to finally disappear beyond the horizon.
The Triumph

Chapter Summary

Iroh returns to the Fire Nation capital, sadder but wiser, to celebrate a triumph for his dearly bought victory.

The storyteller had withdrawn. With the conclusion of the terrible battle and the loss of their great hero, the interest of Trimazu’s audience had rapidly waned. Many now slept soundly at their tables, while others engaged in low conversations with their partners or friends. Even Chen Ho had drowsed while still sitting up, a talent often mastered by the nobility.

The Fire Nation prince and his uncle, however, maintained close attention despite their exhaustion. The former, like a child at bedtime, wanted to hear the end of the story. The triumph of Mequon and the infamous duel that followed were subjects of intense and timeless interest. The latter cared only to escape the detection that had seemed so unavoidable at certain points earlier in the evening.

Iroh had noted the audience’s subdued reaction to Nikon’s death. Perhaps this was out of indifference or emotional fatigue after many hours of gore laden battle description. Their heart strings may simply have been played out. Iroh, prepared for the moment after having shamed himself earlier over the death of his cousin, mirrored the audience’s indifference and betrayed no outward sign that he cared for the man whose life had just ended.

Inside, the memory of storming into the Corona to find his friend’s lifeless body burned more than any other conjured that evening. Only at that moment so long ago, when the world had frozen and his mind had burst into flame, could he truly say he had felt hatred. Anger he had felt many times, but not hatred. Standing over Nikon’s crushed body, he had discovered hatred within him. Hatred for Tien Shin, for the enemy, for the war… for himself.

Those feelings had long since abated. He had had thirty years to consider them. Now there was only the grief, the loss, and the bitter wisdom that hadn’t prevented the loss of his son years later at the lonely gates of Ba Sing Se.

He offered a brief prayer in his mind as the Storyteller took the stage once more, perhaps for the final time that evening.

“I loved you, my friend, and I have missed you terribly…not a day passes that I don’t remember you and wonder what our lives might have been like without war. Wait for me in the Spirit World… I have one great responsibility left… one more duty for this soldier to perform, but then will I come to see you, Xian, my beloved Lu Ten and all our friends who have passed since. Our family will be together again, I promise.”

He opened his eyes to see that Gao had taken up his position once more, his thin frame still erect, his white hair still in perfect place, looking much better than his audience. He bowed low to the master of the house and made the customary motion to ask for permission to continue.

The moment stretched and Gao received no reply. Trimazu was busy. At some point during the last hour servants had brought the obese merchant sack after sack of dispatches. He currently had two scrolls in his hands and was reading both, his eyes darting quickly back and forth between them.
Scrolls and tablets littered the table around him. He scribbled notes and instructions using a large quill pen as he went. A larger scroll tube with red stoppers caught Iroh’s attention, but he could not make out the markings.

“Trimazu!” Governor Lin finally exclaimed, expelling the name through gritted teeth, “Answer him!”

The fat man looked up, a look of surprise on his face. He swept the room with his gaze and was apparently unclear where all the people had come from and what they were doing there.

A servant appeared at his shoulder.

“The Planter’s Moon Feast, your Hugeness, the storyteller begs permission to continue,” he quickly supplied in a hushed tone.

“Oh, yes!” the fat man exclaimed, realization dawning on his rounded face, “Of course, of course! Continue my talented friend!”

Gao bowed low.

“Unbelievable,” Tao Lin observed, “that you actually stoop to conduct… business transactions at a high feast, Trimazu, especially when you’re the host. I mean, really, have you no manners at all?”

“None worth keeping, Governor, I promise you!” Trimazu admitted, his voice reverting to its customary volume, “Besides, I don’t know what your problem is, I do it all the time!”

Chen Ho raised a lid and took his shot.

“You can’t have manners when you do whatever you want whenever you want, you feckless toad. Manners by definition is the art of restraint, a subject of which you are entirely ignorant.”

“Yes, yes!” Trimazu agreed jocularly, “I do enjoy freedom you’ll never have, my friend, ’tis but too true! Now, if you two are quite finished with your rude and barbaric interruptions, we can let Gao finish the story.”

“By all means,” Ho agreed, “at this point I’d set fire to the house to be excused from this ridiculous farce.”

“That too can be arranged! I feel like I need to build a bigger one anyway!” he replied with glee before clapping twice, “All right, Gao, let’s finish up now!”

Gao bowed once as the audience again fell quiet. He scanned the room to see who was awake for the coda of such a long tale. High Feast celebrations at the most opulent households frequently went until dawn the next morning, but many fell asleep before the festivities concluded. He was pleased to see more than half were awake.

“As you command, Master Trimazu,” the storyteller boomed, filling the chamber with his resonant voice, “for now, in parallel to the earlier part of our tale, we will elide the Fire Nation party’s return to their homeland, for very little of note happened, and instead pick up the thread of our story on the day of Iroh’s victory celebration. Here it is worth a brief description of this rare and special event, awarded only to those generals whose victories are deemed worthy of preservation in the annals of time.”

Gao paused and made an extravagant gesture to emphasize what came next.
“For over a thousand years Fire Nation conquerors returning home from the wars have enjoyed the honor of a triumph, a tumultuous parade. In the procession one will see trumpeters, musicians and strange animals from the conquered territories, together with carts laden with treasure and captured armaments. The conqueror rides in a triumphal chariot, dazed prisoners walking in chains before him. Often his children or close friends, clothed in white, would ride beside him or on the trace horses. So it was with General Iroh and his friends on their return from Mequon, bloody, but victorious…”

The Golden Road led directly from Showa Field to the Temple of the Sun, the seat of the Fire Nation War College. Eleven miles long, perfectly straight and two hundred and twenty feet wide, the Golden Road was the site of all formal processions in the capital. From coronations to royal weddings, funerals, religious celebrations and triumphs, this was the center of the Fire Nation from which most of the civilized world was now governed.

Today the street was lined with what seemed the entire population of the Capital. Though winter had arrived, Fate had smiled on the procession and provided excellent weather. Tens of thousands of citizens, commoners, warriors and nobility alike, lined the Golden Road from one end to the other. Many spectators waved standards emblazoned with the symbol of the Fire Nation; others showed likenesses of the Fire Lord and his victorious son. Some held banners with messages for loved ones returning home. Unlike many events in recent years no coercion or even encouragement had been needed to prompt the populace to participate. A victory this large had not been seen in in decades and the people celebrated in earnest what they hoped was the beginning of the end of the war.

A significant portion of the army had returned home to participate and indeed the parade stretched for almost the entire length of the Golden Road. The procession began with the Fire Sages from the Temple of the Sun who blessed the proceedings before they began. They were followed by enormous, colorful representations of the dragons that symbolized each of the Four Corners of the World. Fireworks exploded in cavalcades of rapid snaps and pops behind the paper dragons as they trundled down the Golden Road.

Then marched the victorious Army of the Great Divide. Tien Shin had led with Second Corps, followed by Chieng and Gan with a pair of newly commissioned tank trains, for Corona, Constellation and Firestorm had been left to protect Mequon. Behind them had motored just enough tanks to suggest their importance to the campaign. The machines and the crews manning them, however, had never left the homeland. They were decorations as much as the paper dragons and ceremonial floats.

Next came Iroh’s First Corps, driving before them huge numbers of Earth Kingdom prisoners in chains and vast amounts of spoils taken from the Nasu and the remains of the Army of the Granite Mountains. Most impressively, General Nifong’s armor was mounted on a special covered float and surrounded by piles of captured arms. Some spectators yelled insults at the defeated general’s remains. Others saluted or bowed their heads in respect.

Last of all rode General Iroh, hero of the Fire Nation, basking in the glory of the greatest military victory in a generation. The chariot was enormous, made of precious ebony, painted bright red, finished in gold and trimmed in bright steel. The machine was drawn by four exceptionally rare and beautiful horses. There was only a handful in the whole Fire Nation. All were owned by the state and used only on such momentous occasions as these.

As tradition dictated, he wore a red cloak bordered in a broad stripe of gold. In his hand he held the red baton of command. He stood tall and proud in his chariot as the woman he loved had bade him,
but inside he desperately wanted it just to be over. Pushing aside his feelings, he waved and smiled as the procession advanced towards its termination at the Temple of the Sun.

The citizens shouted his name in endless repetition and many tossed wreaths of orchids and carnations at him. The air was filled with the petals of lotus blossoms and roses thrown by spectators from the second and third stories of the buildings that lined the road. Those who had lost family members in the campaign held up the urns containing the remains of their loved ones and shouted thanks for returning them home.

Beside him in the chariot rode a beautiful young woman dressed in a simple white tunic. She held a golden crown over his head symbolizing the victory that had been won. Iroh only recognized her as Leng, Nikon’s surviving tank driver, after the event began. He wanted to speak with her, for he knew she was one of the few who shared his grief, but he had no opportunity before the parade began and it was not customary for the conqueror to have conversation with his attendant.

The parade route took two hours to traverse. His outward countenance remained intact, but he could not stop thinking about the friends he had left behind.

At one point midway through the procession an old man in rags burst through the wall of guards that lined the street. He hobbled on arthritic legs, but nevertheless managed to approach the victorious general before he was caught. Iroh stopped the chariot.

The vagabond knelt on one knee, spread his arms wide in a gesture of obeisance and addressed the hero of the Fire Nation.

“Hail, General Iroh!” he warned in a quavering voice, “For your sake and the Fire Nation’s, my lord, do not go in the Temple!

Two guards appeared who instantly thrust the old man to the ground.

“Enough of that you old badger mole!” scolded one, “You’re lucky we don’t run you through for approaching his Highness like this!”

“No,” Iroh reprieved with an indulgent wave of his hand, “it’s all right, but why do you say this old man? What’s in the Temple for me to fear?”

The old man, his hands now bound behind him, looked up with devastated eyes, “Your doom, General…and hers.”

This brought Iroh up short. He looked at the man again, but saw no likeness of the Ainu people in him. The young general hesitated.

“All right you, get up!” the soldier began again, roughly yanking the old man to his feet and shuffling him away.

His heart suddenly cold and tight, he tapped the reigns and the chariot moved forward once more. The press hadn’t noticed the delay and the procession went on as it had before.

He wondered at Rhiannon’s vision described to him at Mequon.

*Is today the day?*

Finally, when Iroh thought it would never end, the Temple of the Sun came into sight. As he approached the steep set of stairs leading up to the temple the crowd began to quiet.
There on the steps stood Field Marshal Jeong Jeong and an honor guard ready to escort him to the War College. On his left stood, to his instant displeasure, Tien Shin and the Commander of the Guard, Yotaku Macro. Chieng and Gan, resplendent in their dress uniforms, stood on his right. Alone among all participants Tien Shin wore weapons, the twin, blue enameled tessen he wore at his sides, deadly though they were, were unique in that they were considered decorations and therefore permissible inside the temple.

The chariot came to a stop and the spectators fell silent in anticipation. He surveyed the crowd once with a sweeping motion of his head before stepping onto the street. Leng picked up the edge of Iroh’s cloak as he passed and made sure it did not trip him. She stepped forward on the chariot’s runner, placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“Ye have won the greatest of glory, General, worshipped and loved by all, but remember this,” she reminded him quietly, “that thou art mortal and someday ye will return to the dust from which ye came.”

Iroh looked at the serious girl who had just delivered the famous warning given to every recipient of the Fire Nation’s supreme honor.

“Yes,” he replied in a subdued voice, “If I have learned anything… it is that.”

He looked up the wide, white steps that ran steeply to the foot of the temple.

*Xian, dear cousin, you should stand in my place... and Nikon, my friend, you were a better warrior and a better friend than I will ever be...*

He began his ascension and soon met the party that awaited him. Jeong Jeong saluted him sharply and bowed low, Macro and his attendants instantly following his lead.

“Hail, Prince Iroh! Your homecoming is a joyous event, indeed.”

“Greetings, Field Marshal.”

“Let me be the first to salute you as General and welcome you as a brother to the War College of the Fire Nation.”

They took each other by the right elbow in personal greeting.

“I am honored.”

“Your actions have brought you honor. I’m sorry for the loss of your cousin. Prince Xian was loved by the people and respected even among our bitterest enemies.”

“I thank you. He was the noblest of us all. Are they prepared for us inside?”

“Yes, the Fire Lord and the Cabinet are assembled in anticipation of your arrival.”

“And how is the Fire Lord’s mood today?” inserted Tien Shin.

Jeong Jeong paused and adopting a guarded expression scanned the skies, “Like the weather.”

Looking about him, the elder Prince replied, “Excellent – the weather’s good today.”

The Field Marshal nodded once and replied darkly, “Changeable.”

“No matter,” the elder prince replied with a wide smile, “This is a day of celebration and I have news
that will no doubt interest the Fire Lord.”

Iroh and Gan shared a brief glance at the sinister statement.

Turning his icy stare away from Tien Shin, Jeong Jeong once again addressed Iroh, “I welcome you as a brother in arms, General Iroh, but you may come to regret your elevation. Since you departed for the Earth Kingdom, eleven of our fellow officers have been executed for treason – including Master Chen and General Ho.”

“I am sorry to hear of this, Field Marshal. We cannot afford to waste such talent if we hope to win.”

“They were all good men.”

“If they were all good men, Field Marshal,” Tien Shin questioned with a knowing smirk, “how could our beloved Fire Lord find them guilty?”

Jeong Jeong looked at Iroh’s step brother with undisguised disdain.

“You have a gift for logic, Prince.”

Iroh wondered how long it would be before Jeong Jeong himself was accused. Tien Shin’s expression left little doubt it would not be long.

The Field Marshal turned back to Iroh.

“Let us proceed, General, the Fire Lord awaits you.”

They marched up the steps and the crowd began to cheer again. The crowd would not disperse until he entered the Temple of the Sun itself, for this was a rare and wondrous event. The arched, double doors of the Temple were made of pure gold and stretched three stories tall. Only the Fire Lord and the elected members of the College were allowed to pass them and only upon the declaration of war or upon the conclusion of peace.

The only exception to this strict rule was that during the celebration of a triumph the party of the conqueror would be allowed to pass the doors where inside the Fire Lord, the Cabinet and the War College waited to receive him. The last time the doors had been opened was sixteen years before, and tradition dictated that the conqueror was escorted, if possible, by the last victor to win the honor.

They reached the top of the stairs. The golden doors loomed up before them. Huge fire pots blazed on either side.

The crowd had gone silent again. They waited for the signal as did Iroh and his party. Moments later a huge gong peeled loudly from inside the temple.

Iroh spread his legs wide, drew his breath to regulate his chi and swiftly released five separate streams of hot orange flame at the door. The ornate locking mechanism on its frame received the streams of fire. Slowly, but with gathering speed, the intricate keys, circlips and cylinders began to move and spin. Iroh’s river of flame went out just as the lock snapped open.

The great gold doors swung open noiselessly on rhodium hinges. The press erupted with cheering and screaming. Fireworks exploded throughout the capital.

He turned his head to glance at Chieng, her hair a shining stream of midnight in the bright sun, and was rewarded with the most brilliant and loving smile he had ever seen. For a brief moment, he was happy, the happiest man alive.
General Iroh entered the Temple of the Sun in triumph as his father and grandfather had before him.

A/N: Would you believe this is the scene that started the whole story? This was the first image in my mind before I even had a plot. Iroh, returning home from the wars in triumph, his armor burnished and bright in the noonday sun, riding his chariot in glory through the streets of the capital to be received with honor by the Fire Lord…sadder, but wiser on his way to becoming man we knew and loved in the show…
Fire Lord Azulon

Chapter Summary

Tien Shin makes his move... and Iroh runs into Chieng's infamous father.

The doors were open. The triumphal party stood in the entrance, wide shafts of sunlight streaming in behind them.

A narrow hallway hung with tapestries bearing the Fire Nation flag ran along the temple’s forward facade. Opposite the great doors an even wider archway provided access to the inner temple.

The party entered the archway. The chamber was an enormous, vaulted cavern. At its far end lay an apse with a low altar. A deep fire pit glowed in the center of the room, surrounded by Fire Sages. On either wall a series of low, wide marble steps ran down to the floor.

The Fire Lord and his cabinet sat on pillows of gold carefully arranged according to rank in front of the altar. Prince Ozai sat impassively at his father’s right hand. The members of the War College sat crossed legged on the wide marble steps. Jeong Jeong calmly assumed his place on the single empty spot that awaited him. Macro and the honor guard retreated to stand at their assigned positions in the forward gallery.

Father and son regarded each other calmly across the flames.

Iroh stepped forward and addressed the chamber in a strong, confident voice that echoed off the walls and ceiling.

“I, General Iroh, son of Fire Lord Azulon, come before you, conscript fathers, victorious against the enemies of the Fire Nation to receive your blessing.”

He did not bow. Perhaps the most signal honor of all, a general returning home in triumph bowed to no one, not even the Fire Lord, on the day of celebration.

Azulon stood. The rest followed.

“Hail, General Iroh,” the ancient ruler greeted, “We welcome you home, a true son of Agni and Master of Fire. You have won a glorious victory for the Fire Nation and earned your triumph. Your name will be entered into the ranks of the most illustrious in our country’s history.”

All bowed to the conqueror.

The doors closed behind them. The flames of the altar fire leapt to the sky.

The formal religious ceremony then began which lasted a little under an hour. The Fire Sages had sacrificed to Agni and asked the Sun Spirit to bless the Fire Lord and the people. Chanting mantras from the sacred texts, they had then performed a firebending ritual that melted stone, vaporized water and consumed the wind to demonstrate the superiority of the national element.
Once the ceremony was complete, Iroh stood and recounted briefly the central events of the campaign. He was careful to address the question of his succession to the leadership of the army in anticipation of any accusation from the Tien Shin. Chieng stood on his right, his step brother and Gan on his left. The members of the War College and the Cabinet were then encouraged to ask questions in order of rank.

“A great victory, General,” the War Minister commented, “but a costly one. The loss of so many dreadnoughts and their payloads was most unfortunate.”

“Yes,” Iroh agreed, “but the weaponry proved most effective at Mequon.”

“Not worth the money,” the aging official replied.

Gan opened his mouth to object, but was cut off by Iroh’s response.

“I won’t argue that now, Minister, but I believe the rockets will be required to breach the walls of Ba Sing Se when we reach them.”

Iroh turned to the engineer.

“Chieng, they’ll penetrate, right?”

“They should, General,” she replied confidently, “The war heads will need some modification, but, yes, based on our intelligence, we should be able to penetrate.”

The War Minister considered this and nodded his once in affirmation.

The Fire Lord spoke last.

“So, General, you plan to attack Ba Sing Se next?”

The audience waited expectantly for an answer to this question. Capturing Ba Sing Se and the Earth King would end the war.

“No, Lord Azulon, but I have developed a strategy to force that outcome within three seasons. I will be prepared to present this to the War College within a fortnight if it pleases you.”

“Yes, General,” the aging ruler replied, “It will please me greatly.”

The Fire Lord stood.

“This council is ended,” he commanded, “The homecoming feast begins at sundown. Now, leave us, all of you, I wish to speak with General Iroh and his officers alone.”

Everyone stood and began speaking simultaneously. A few intrepid members of the War College shook Iroh’s hand as they passed by on their way to exit the temple. Side doors at the back connected to the palace and served as the regular access to the temple when the great doors remained closed.

Soon the chamber was empty save the Fire Lord, Prince Ozai and the triumphal party.

The Fire Lord motioned for the group to approach him. They complied, all but Iroh bowing once more to the ruler of the Fire Nation. He looked over the party with his sharp, penetrating glance. He shifted back and forth between Iroh and Chieng several times before speaking.

“A bold claim, General, to propose victory within three years.”
“As Agni is my witness, Father, I will make it happen.”

Azulon made a noncommittal noise before turning to the elder prince.

“What is this news you have, Tien Shin?” he prompted without preamble.

The group suddenly tensed. Ozai’s eyes glinted. Iroh and his friends had prepared carefully for the former daimyo to make good on his threat to prosecute Iroh for taking command.

Tien Shin smiled and replied.

“Most noble lord, General Iroh’s account of the campaign made clear the contribution of the Army of the Song to our victory at Mequon. He indicated that he sent a message to Mequon before we left the Nasu and that Governor T’zan relayed it to General Shu.”

Iroh and Gan quickly exchanged a panicked glance. This wasn’t what they had anticipated, it was far worse.

“So?” the Fire Lord prompted.

“Such a message would have taken weeks to reach them. The Army of the Song was besieging Omashu over a thousand leagues to the south at the time. It occurred to me that there wasn’t enough time for all this to happen. There was less than two months between the battles.”

“What are you saying, Tien Shin,” Gan interrupted, “What’s your point?”

“I think you know… Captain,” Tien Shin replied with derision, then to Azulon, “Lord, after looking into the matter, I obtained proof that the Army of the Song did indeed receive a message from Governor T’zan.”

Iroh felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as Tien Shin produced two pieces of neatly folded paper from underneath his breastplate.

Tien Shin unfolded the paper and began to read.

“To the Most High and Noble General Shu, Supreme Commander of the Army of the Song, I, Rhiannon T’zan, Imperial Governor of the Province of Mequon send greetings.

My lord, I must regrettably report that a great disaster has befallen our beloved Nation at Lake Myojin. General Xian is dead and a great part of the the Army of the Great Divide has been destroyed.

Prince Iroh has taken command and now makes for Mequon with all that remains of our forces. He hopes that you can move immediately to support him. A great and final battle will take place on the steppes east of Mequon and General Iroh hopes to catch our enemy between the two Fire Nation armies.

May Agni bless you, General and bring with all speed to the aid of my beloved city!”

Tien Shin stopped reading and looked up with a confident smile.

“I will echo Captain Shu, Prince Tien Shin, what is your point?”

“Rhiannon’s letter is undated, my lord, but the Army of the Song’s war diary,” here he indicated the second of the two pieces of paper in his possession, “shows that it was received a week before the battle of Lake Myojin and a full three weeks before Iroh sent his own message to Mequon! The war
diary then records that the Army of the Song broke camp and began moving north two days before the battle of Lake Myojin.”

He paused a moment to let this sink in.

“So, how did Governor T’zan know that we’d lost at Lake Myojin… before it happened? How did she know that Iroh’s plan was to envelop the enemy east of Mequon and that she needed to send a message to General Shu?”

Azulon smiled slightly, but did not look surprised. Tien Shin fingered the tessen in his belt and continued in his most calculated and dangerous tone.

“I suggest that Governor T’zan has inherited the clarovoyance of her mother’s people and that she be recalled immediately to ensure proper use of this gift… and to account for its concealment.”

Unable to contain himself, Iroh erupted.

“Father, no! This is yet another base manipulation of my step-brother’s to achieve his own ends! Whether this is true or not, he only wants her recalled so he can force her to honor the betrothal to him – a betrothal made against her will!”

Azulon stood stock still. He could have been a statue. The Fire Lord looked back and forth between the two young men. One arrogant, cool and confident, the other angry, tense and off balance. The moment stretched until the old man suddenly threw back his head and laughed, a cold hard sound, and shook his head as if this were exactly what he had expected.

“Yes, I know all of this.”

Tien Shin and Iroh instantly wore identical expressions of surprise. Ozai crossed his arms and surveyed his brother and step brother in expectant silence.

“What, General Iroh?” Azulon continued, “Did you really think she was able to hide this from me? Or your cousin? Or you for that matter?”

Iroh wisely declined to respond.

“I know everything that is said and done… and thought.” the Fire Lord concluded darkly.

“Then why leave her at Mequon, my lord?” Tien Shin finally rejoined after recovering from the shock of the aging leader’s unexpected response.

“Why? Because her gift was never of any practical use… until now.”

“Then you will recall her, my lord?”

“No! Father, she is –“

“Silence, General!” the Fire Lord suddenly thundered, “Even on your day of triumph, I still rule!”

Iroh obeyed, quickly casting his gaze to the floor, anger flushing his face red. Gan and Chieng stood stock still, uncertain how to react.

The old man turned back to the elder prince.

“She will be summoned, Tien Shin. Have her then, though you are a lordly fool. You take her for the wealth and power you think you will gain, but you will only avail yourself of misery and loss by
Tien Shin turned to Iroh and smirked.

“Thank you, my lord,” he nevertheless replied with a bow, “I will see the order issued at once.”

The Fire Lord turned to General Shu’s second son.

“Captain, report to your father and bring him before me. I intend to elevate him to the War College for his contribution. I will see him in the annex one quarter of an hour before the feast.”

“Yes, my lord,” Gan replied with a stiff bow. Stony faced he departed.

The old man turned back to his elder son, though he addressed all who remained.

“Go now, all of you, and prepare for the feast. This is a day of celebration, General Iroh. Only you can insist that it be otherwise.”

The Fire Lord turned and exited the temple, Tien Shin and Ozai in tow.

Moments later Chieng and Iroh were alone. As soon as the doors closed behind the Fire Lord the raven haired engineer turned to her mate and took both his hands in her own. Iroh breathed heavily, his eyes burning with rage.

“We’ll fix this,” she said earnestly.

He looked into her eyes.

“You think we can?”

“Yes, I don’t know how,” she confessed, “but somehow, we’ll get her out of this mess, okay?”

He squeezed her hands. She didn’t know about the specifics of Rhiannon’s prophecy. If she had, he wondered if she would express such confidence. He wanted to believe her. He did. She had gotten them through the desert. Maybe she could be right here too?

“Let’s just try to enjoy the feast and we’ll think about what to do. We can grab Gan as soon as it’s over and put together a plan, okay?”

“Okay,” he said with a weak smile, “Let’s go get ready.”

She released one of his hands, but held on to the other. Determined to avoid the Fire Lord’s party, they exited the back of the temple through the opposite door used by the aging ruler and the two princes. Entering a long hallway that connected the temple to the east wing of the palace they were surprised to find it empty.

They turned the corner and entered the long arcade that extended along the eastern edge of the Fire Lord’s reception hall. This hallway was not empty. A tall, imperious figure surrounded by attendants rapidly approached them from the opposite end of the gallery.

Chieng gasped suddenly and stiffened as the other party halted in front them. She dropped to the ground, her chin on her hands in the ancient show of respect reserved for the Fire Lord and the patriarchs of the Great Houses.

“Greetings my lord, Father, I come to serve.”
Iroh started in shock. He examined the regal figure before him and knew that he had finally come face to face with the infamous Liu Shiung. He was neither a Cabinet member nor a member of the War College, so he must have been with the other high nobility on one of the palace terraces that overlooked the Golden Road.

He was much taller than his daughter, who clearly took after her mother in stature. His hair, sideburns and long, thin beard were snow white. His topknot was held in place by a severe, double headed arrow of iron. Father and daughter shared the bright golden eyes that could pierce the soul, a fierce countenance and a perfectly erect posture.

The white haired old man ignored Iroh and regarded his daughter coldly.

“I am told that your machines failed the Fire Lord at Lake Myojin,” he began without greeting.

Chieng remained perfectly still, but her body tensed. Iroh could feel the words cut and knew that she bled inside.

He instantly hated the old man.

“Yes, Father.”

“You are a failure, Ten-Ten. Many have died because of your incompetence. You have brought shame to our House.”

This time the physical reaction was obvious. Her fists clenched and her slight frame shook.

“Father… I…”

“Silence!” the old man thundered, cutting off her attempt to reply, then in a quiet tone of utter contempt, “I will not bandy about crooked words in some pitiful attempt to fabricate excuses. I have neither time nor patience for those who fail in their duty to the Fire Nation.”

Suddenly Iroh found himself standing between Liu Shiung and his slight daughter.

“Stop! I command it!” Iroh roared, his eyes aflame with anger and resolution.

The attendants stared in horror at the conflict that had bloomed suddenly before them. Such a confrontation was unprecedented. No one challenged Lord Shiung, not even the Fire Lord. The prostrate woman looked up in shock, her mouth agape. Surely the apocalypse had arrived.

The old man shifted his bloodless gaze to the Crown Prince. The golden eyes set so beautifully in Chieng’s delicate features looked reptilian in her father’s.

“She is my daughter, Prince Iroh,” Lord Shiung declared, for he had recognized the Crown Prince instantly though he had declined a greeting, “and I will deal with her as I see fit. You have no right to interfere, even if you are Azulon’s son.”

Iroh stepped closer to the taller man.

“Father or no, if you treat her that way again I will burn you down, whether you accept agni kai or not!”

Without thought the Crown Prince raised his fists, wreathed in fire. He continued in a threatening tone, his voice growing louder as he went on.

“And you will refer to me as General Iroh, Lord Shiung! On my day of triumph you will accept my
Iroh lowered his fists, extinguished his fire and drew himself to his full height.

“I am ashamed of you, Lord Shiung, for failing to recognize your daughter’s contribution and her quality.

The old man examined Iroh closely as if seeing him for the first time. He arched an eyebrow and smiled with more than a trace of satisfaction.

“I like you, General Iroh,” he declared suddenly, and to Iroh’s surprise he could tell he meant it, though his countenance lost none of its frigidity.

“I can see your reputation for courage and honesty is well deserved. That’s good. The ruling class of our nation is honeycombed with liars, boot lickers and other low life scum, but you apparently are not one of them. You have taken after your father and your cousin.”

Iroh was confused by this response and made no immediate reply. He remained steadfastly between Liu and his daughter.

“I know Ten-Ten’s quality better than you,” the old man continued almost conversationally, ignoring Iroh’s earlier command and speaking as if Chieng wasn’t present, “But I can see you have made up your mind.”

The Crown Prince was uncertain what he referred to, but did not hesitate to reply. He had taken a strong stand and did not want his resolve to appear to weaken for any reason.

“I have, Lord Shiung.”

The old man crossed his arms.

“Will you have her, then?”

The question sucked the air out of the room. Iroh could feel rather than see Chieng move behind him. He thought he heard her… squeak.

Iroh’s face went slack.

“I’m sorry, uh, what?”

Lord Shiung laughed wickedly.

“You challenge me for her, her father and rightful Lord, but am I to understand then you aren’t...
prepared to take responsibility for her yourself?"

“I don’t understand, Lord Shiung,” Iroh sputtered in reply, “What do you mean “take responsibility” for her? In case you haven’t noticed she can take care of herself!”

The old man pursed his lips and shook his head.

“You haven’t thought this through,” Liu observed correctly, “Very well, then I’ll make myself clear, General. I offer Ten-Ten to you in marriage. Then you will certainly be free to deal with her in your household as you see fit.”

“Ten-Ten?” Iroh asked dumbly, trying desperately to gain time to formulate a coherent response.

He was in shock at how the tables had turned so suddenly and was only dimly aware that Liu had been calling her that since the unexpected interview began. Iroh could feel the heat on his face and knew that he had turned the color of his own fire.

“Chieng, if you insist,” Liu clarified with more than a trace of exasperation, “We have called her Ten-Ten since she was a little girl. Now, General, quit stalling. What is your response to my offer?”

Against his will the Crown Prince stepped aside and turned to look upon the woman he so fiercely protected.

Chieng had risen on one knee. She looked rapidly back and forth between her father and her superior. Her mouth hung slightly open, her golden eyes bewildered and more vulnerable than Iroh had ever seen. She blushed furiously. He desperately wanted to hold her close to him and take her away from this place and this awful old man.

Finally she found her voice, though it quavered with emotions she could not name.

“Father, please, I accept responsibility for my failure, his Highness is…”

The old man stopped her short with a curt, dismissive wave of his hand.

“Enough, Ten-Ten,” he replied without looking at her, “I am no fool. The young General has courage and honesty. I will see for myself what other qualities he possesses.”

Lord Shiung’s smile disappeared.

“I ask again, General, will you take her?”

Iroh hated himself for the reply he knew he must give. His father had pointed out only minutes before that, even on his day of triumph, the Fire Lord ruled his own House. He was even prevented by custom and the strict rules of marriage negotiation between the Great Houses from acknowledging openly the deep feelings he now knew he harbored for her.

“I am not free to decide whom I will marry, Lord Shiung, as you well know.”

Liu smirked.

“Exactly. General you may be, but you are bound to the will of your Father, the Fire Lord, the lord of your House, just as Ten-Ten is bound to mine! Neither of you are free to do as you please,” then, in a more reflective tone, “But then, in truth, neither am I, nor is your Father. We are all of us prisoners!”

The old man laughed harshly, then lowered his head to look squarely at Iroh.
“I advise you to temper your self-righteousness, General, and accept this reality.”

The smirk became an evil smile. If his irises had been vertical he’d have looked like a dragon.

“Besides, you should be thankful that you have escaped today, General. Ten-Ten is an arrogant, nasty little bitch whom no one has been willing to marry despite the wealth, power and connections of my House. I accept responsibility for this, of course, she clearly takes after me, but because of that I’m afraid she will remain a spinster.”

Liu turned to his daughter.

“Get up, Ten-Ten, I want to see your mother. She at least has performed well.”

The raven haired engineer stood. Her posture sagged, her gaze locked on the floor. For the first time since he met her she looked dead and above all defeated. Liu swept imperiously from the room, his daughter following meekly behind him, the rest of the attendants in tow. She did not look at him as she passed.

Iroh shook with anger. He hated Liu Shiung… and, for only the second time in his life, himself.

_Crown Prince… destined to rule the Fire Nation and the world… and I can’t even help her… please, please, Agni, let me help her!_

When he was alone he drew a breath and exhaled a great gout of fire from his mouth which filled the atrium to its ceiling. Anger rapidly gave way to grief. He sunk to his knees and amidst bitter tears beat the floor with bloody hands.
The Duel

Chapter Summary

Rhiannon's prophecy is fulfilled.

Iroh burst into his apartment, his mind awash in a swirling, molten mixture of anger, fear, despair and helplessness. Two servants appeared from nowhere. He suffered their assistance to remove his breastplate, but waved them off as soon as it was gone. With curt, jerky movements he removed his greaves, gauntlets, boots and other pieces of armor. He handed them over to the servants and dismissed them to retreat to his bedroom.

He sat down heavily upon the great chest at the foot of his bed. He wanted to weep, but refused. The world spun around him. Fate had once again thrust him down from commanding heights. Early that afternoon he had stood at the open doors of the Temple of Sun gazing into the loving countenance of the woman he loved. Now he felt powerless to save her and his adopted sister from slavery. Dimly he recalled the awful descent from elation to panic during that awful third day of Mequon.

I can’t let this happen! She’s a hero and he treats her like… like she’s nothing! I can’t let this be!

He rocked back and forth, his mind trying desperately to assert control over his emotions, but failing.

The other horrifying development haunted him.

I’m sorry, Rae, oh Agni, I’m so sorry! That son of a bitch is winning… I’ve lost Xian, and Nikon, I’ve sent a hundred thousand men to their deaths… and I still can’t stop him…

On the floor a mosaic sun dial showed the feast would begin in less than an hour. Steeling himself, he stood up and walked over to the adjoining thermæ where a hot bath awaited him. He hoped rather than believed that the warm, tranquil water would calm his inner torrent. Once stripped down, he stepped down into the deep, steaming pool of water. His fear proved prophetic however and minutes later he toweled himself off in no better state than when he entered.

Wearing only a towel he marched into the dressing room to find the servants waiting to dress him for the feast. Next to a curule chair a table had been laid out with a small pot of tea, a cup and two scrolls. After he put on his underclothes he considered the teapot and decided to pour himself a cup, though he did not really want it. The memory of Xian and anguish for Chieng bade him take it. A quick sip made him tense reflexively. It was ginseng, but it stirred the memory of hyacinth.

He put the cup down.

“Who sent the messages?” he asked the servants.

“We don’t know, your Highness,” the elder replied, “They were delivered with the refreshment from the kitchen.”

He picked up the missives. They were identical. He opened the first.

The handwriting was unmistakable, but he couldn’t read it.
“What the… what the hell is this!?” Iroh questioned in incredulity.

The message was coded using bizarre symbols comprised mostly of geometric shapes and foreign characters. The handwriting was Tien Shin’s.

He flicked open the second.

“Bring me a desk! Now!” he barked.

The servants responded instantly and moments later he was cross legged on the floor with a dark wood writing table over his lap. The teapot and its cup were placed discreetly on a corner.

“Leave me!”

“Your Highness! The feast begins in half –”

“Out! Out, I said!”

The servants obeyed and slid the door closed behind them.

Iroh worked furiously. The second scroll contained a substitution cipher key written in the same print used by the capital’s numerous news rags. The first message did not take long to decode. He never finished the operation. Halfway through the decryption he stopped and reread the uncoded portion over and over, his insides boiling up inside him.

He dropped the scroll and stood, upending the desk and its contents. The teapot shattered on the hardwood floor.

Seconds later he erupted from his apartments, his fists wreathed in bright orange fire. He never thought once of Rhiannon’s vision.

The winter sun hung low in the sky. The feast was to begin at sundown. Even at this time of year the hours of sunrise and sunset did not vary much in the Fire Nation. They perhaps had twenty minutes before the event.

Iroh, his mind aflame, preserved just enough sanity to guide him to where he was most likely to find his victim.

A small group of notaries had gathered in the annex adjacent to the Fire Lord’s grand reception hall, patiently awaiting the appearance of the Fire Lord himself. The annex was a long, wide, salon with open windows that faced west. The east wall was hung with tapestries separated by large oil lamps lit in anticipation of a night of celebration and supported by long iron pikes.

General Shu, Gan, Tien Shin, Tojo and a few other nobles stood together speaking quietly. All wore dress uniforms, having permission on such a high occasion to wear their decorations. Gone was the burnished armor worn during the procession.

Iroh heard none of the conversation. He marked only his target and the beautiful pair of blue enameled war fans that hung on either side of the hated prince’s belt.

The party looked up in surprise and shock at Iroh’s roar of rage as he burst into the far end of the room. The young general looked nothing like he had appeared earlier, resplendent as he had been in his triumphant regalia. Iroh was, in fact, wearing nothing but his underclothes. He was, however,
beyond embarrassment or even understanding.

“Iroh!” Gan exclaimed in horror.

He ignored his friend and everyone else in the room. He looked only at the man he intended to kill.

Tien Shin locked eyes with Iroh and saw no trace of the brash, gentle idiot he had long despised. Instead, the Crown Prince’s soft brown orbs, now hard as adamant, burned with the Will of Fire.

“General Iroh, what is –” Gan’s father broke in, but was silenced by the body of the Crown Prince blowing past him.

Tojo and the other nobles, shocked and terrified at the unanticipated turn of events, hopped out of the way as they identified the target of the sudden and violent assault.

Iroh’s hands and forearms burned with bright orange fire. He was completely unaware that he had burned off the sleeves of his undertunic. Suddenly he was within melee range, having closed the gap between him and his opponent in what seemed an instant. As on the steppes weeks before, his mastery of close combat tactics and agni kai was drowned out by rage, pain and hatred, his only thought to get his hands around the neck of his tormentor.

Tien Shin stood his ground and managed a few words before Iroh began his attack.

“Stop this, Iroh! We will have no agni –”

The elder prince dodged a crushing blow and a second later a jet of fire which Iroh launched from his offhand.

“Get help!” Gan’s father shouted to his son.

Gan moved instantly to comply, but Iroh did not hear it. He did not hear or see anything other than his opponent.

The tessen appeared in Tien Shin’s hands. With a quick, practiced flick the fan blades spread wide, revealing intricate silver designs that glinted in the shafts of light cast by the rapidly setting sun.

“Come to your death then, animal!” Tien Shin sneered in a sneering voice that none but Iroh could hear, “You have played my game and lost!”

Iroh did not respond. He didn’t even hear the words. He controlled his breathing and his chi. This was the extent and limit of his control and with great effort he focused all his will to that end.

As the elder prince spoke, Iroh assumed a basic horse stance and aimed a blast of fire at his opponent’s lower body. Tien Shin danced gracefully out of the way, stepped forward, turned and swept Iroh’s feet out from under him. The Crown Prince responded instantly by using his then free legs to entangle Tien Shin’s. Both went down in a heap on the floor and simultaneously rolled back onto their feet and stood.

The elder prince, using the twin advantages of greater reach and weaponry, took the offensive. His main hand war fan zipped past Iroh’s nose, but the second came down with a resounding crack on his opponent’s shoulder. Iroh roared in pain, but the blow did not truly register in his body. The adrenaline and emotion prevented him from suffering its effects.

Iroh did not respond. He didn’t even hear the words. He controlled his breathing and his chi. This was the extent and limit of his control and with great effort he focused all his will to that end.

Tien Shin pivoted on one foot and swung his main hand tessen once again in a short jab aimed at Iroh’s throat. In a lightning reflexive move Iroh blocked the fan by sandwiching it between the palms
of his hands. A blow with the off hand fan was deflected by a kick from Iroh which knocked the blade out of his opponent’s grip. The 
tessen clattered to the floor. A second kick landed on Tien Shin’s abdomen which separated them momentarily.

Dimly Iroh was aware that the audience had grown. A circle of faceless, nameless, elegantly dressed party guests now lined the regularly spaced apertures connecting the annex to the entry hall. Every face wore a horrified mixture of shock and fascination. The Crown Prince, Victor of Mequon, was at that moment without any trace of doubt parading around in his bedclothes engaged in a clear, high intensity attempt to kill his step brother. Tien Shin was an object of fear and loathing, but not one of them knew why General Iroh had chosen that moment or the bizarre method to move against him. Many rooted for his success. All feared the consequences should he lose.

The world held its breath as the combatants battled with ever increasing fury.

Tien Shin launched several quick fire balls all of which landed, but which were expertly dissipated by Iroh’s steepled palms. The elder prince back flipped, landed on his hands, then launched himself back off the ground, deftly grabbing the errant war fan as he leapt back into the air. He landed on his feet only to whirl and see Iroh halfway through a terrifying wind up that he recognized instantly.

The Crown Prince had seized the opportunity without thinking. Widening his stance and taking a deep, measured breath, he prepared to split his chi. The air around his hands crackled and popped with rapidly rising electric potential. Slowly he brought the middle and index fingers of each hand toward each other.

“Lightning!” General Shu suddenly bellowed, seeing the danger, “Run!”

Everyone began screaming at once.

The scene disintegrated into a panic as the onlookers vacated in a sudden, uncoordinated stampede. As the crowd receded to the entry hall several palace guards burst onto the scene only to freeze when they saw what was happening.

Tien Shin, blocked by the crowd and unable to flee, closed his 
tessen, turned and grabbed one of the pikes supporting the oil lamps. The glass bulb immediately fell from the top of the pike and blew up all over the floor. The elder prince ignored the rapidly spreading flames and drove the iron pike deep into the tile.

The room flashed brilliant white as Iroh discharged. A raw arc of bright blue electricity sprang forth from his extended right arm. A blast of hot air whiplashed against his face as the compression shock of the blast expanded around them. The smoke cleared to reveal the iron stake melted in place where it had been driven into the floor, three dead or dying guards and Tien Shin, undamaged and springing forward to the attack.

With a cry of impotent rage, his breathing ragged, Iroh surged forward to meet his opponent’s charge.

The elder prince snapped open his war fans. His eyes stung both from the stench of ozone and the burnt human flesh of the ill fated guards who had taken the brunt of the attack. Stunned by the power of the Iroh’s prowess, he nevertheless moved with lethal precision, knowing his only hope for survival lay in his opponent’s undisciplined attack.

Iroh launched two quick blasts of fire that Tien Shin batted out of the way with his weapons. He then swung off hand which Iroh blocked with his own. Anticipating a swing from Tien Shin’s main hand, Iroh moved to block, but Tien Shin instead stepped to his left, freeing his off hand once more and
allowing a second attack. Iroh jumped back to avoid the second blow, but not far enough to avoid
the sudden slash from his opponent’s main hand. A large, bloody gash opened across Iroh’s chest.
He felt nothing except a spreading cold sensation.

The crowd had returned to block the exits and stared in fear and wonder at the carnage. No one
dared enter the annex itself. Somewhere behind the mass of nobles and servants Iroh could hear
shouts of people trying to wade through the throng. His ears heard the sounds, but the meaning was
utterly lost on him. He continued his absolute focus on his opponent.

Tien Shin shifted his stance back and forth as he probed for another opportunity to attack. His main
hand tessen ran crimson with Iroh’s blood.

His opponent laughed under his breath.

“You’re finished, “brother”,” he exulted, “Just like your idiot cousin and filthy street rat friend… and
you’ve done it all for me!”

Iroh found his voice, though the words that finally emerged came out in a low, threatening growl that
seemed to come from another body entirely.

“You… you killed him… you killed him…”

A knowing, evil smile appeared on his opponent’s face. He twirled his war fan in a taunting gesture.

“Prove it,” he purred.

Iroh roared and launched himself forward. Unbalanced and moving too fast, Tien Shin stepped out
of his way and, closing a fan, calmly stabbed him in the arm with its sharp end in a single, fluid
motion. The other still spread wide cut a clean arc across his back. Blood quickly drenched both
sides of his undertunic.

Hot, searing pain instantly penetrated Iroh’s shield of adrenalin and anger. He howled in agony as
Tien Shin withdrew the weapon and unfolded it once again. Iroh staggered back and looked with
hatred into the eyes of the enemy. He fired two quick jets of fire from the ends of his war fans which
Iroh barely dodged, his breath now coming in sharp, painful gasps.

The elder prince, his confidence soaring, continued to gloat.

“You’re a failure, Iroh, unworthy of your father and grandfather! You lost Xian, your gutter trash
friend and now Rhiannon! After you’re gone I will take your place! And then… then I will make
sure Gan and that arrogant dreadnought whore you love so much follows you!”

Iroh’s vision went red with rage, once again blotting the pain of his wounds.

“Never!” he vowed with a hoarse scream.

“Stop me then!” the elder prince taunted, his eyes sharp and full of malice.

Agni, help me! Help me save them! Save her!

Then, as he stood there, his vision blurred, his breath ragged, his mind suddenly calmed and he saw
clearly. The prophecy of Rhiannon returned to him.

So, this is how it happens.

He stood straight and raised his palms, aflame once more, to a guard position.
“Yes, Tien Shin, I am stopping you… right now…and a victory greater even than Mequon will it be.”

Iroh forced down the pain and anger, the world resolving into focus around him. His ragged breath settled. He scanned the annex and finally saw the crowd. At the back, Macro had just appeared with a dozen palace guards.

He turned back to his tormentor.

Tien Shin stepped forward once more, slicing and swiping at Iroh with his war fans. They clicked and clacked with distinctive metallic sounds as the elder prince rhythmically opened and shut the blades as he pressed forward his attack. Iroh blocked each blow that came close enough to land. Over three sets of attack and counter they had turned about so that Iroh now had most of the hallway behind him.

Ignoring the pain and rapidly spreading sensation of numbness in his back, Iroh parried one last thrust from his opponent before bending low and sweeping his right foot in semi circle along the floor. A long, perfectly formed arc of flame blossomed from his foot and expanded outwards. Tien Shin dodged by leaping into the air, but lost the initiative. When he landed Iroh had already launched a fist wreathed in fire which connected solidly with Tien Shin’s neck.

The elder prince cried out in agony, his flesh searing at the direct contact with Iroh’s flaming hand. The former daimyo slapped away his opponent’s fist from his wounded neck with a sharp crack from his main hand tessen. He staggered back, choking from the blow to his wind pipe.

Sensing possibility, Iroh used the momentum from the war fan’s blow to bring his arm back around and grab Tien Shin’s main hand wrist. The elder prince himself then twisted in an attempt to land an off hand blow. Anticipating the move, Iroh quickly grabbed his off hand wrist as well.

They stood locked together for a moment, both straining against the other.

Then, feeling his body’s strength ebbing from the blood loss, with a massive heave he turned his back to his opponent and pulled him over his shoulder in one swift, liquid move. Tien Shin landed on his back with a clatter. The elder prince attempted to roll away, which Iroh allowed him to do at the cost of losing his tessen. As Tien Shin twisted away the Crown Prince slid his grip up his opponent’s wrists until they alighted on the shafts of the blue enameled weapons. As Tien Shin’s body accelerated away he provided all the momentum required for Iroh to retain them.

Tien Shin regained his feet to see Iroh brandishing his twin trademarks.

Iroh flicked open the tessen and swung them in a rapid series of sharp, controlled arcs at his retreating opponent. With a few measured breaths he found he was able to imbue the blades in an intense nimbus of fire. Tien dodged and answered with rapid blasts of flame of his own from both hands and feet, but none landed.

Suddenly the elder prince found himself backed into the melted pike that had saved his life from Iroh’s lightning. Surprised, he tried to recover by twisting away, but the unexpected obstacle made him lose his balance.

Iroh heard a commotion from the crowd behind him as he leapt to take advantage of his hated enemy’s misstep.

“Stop! I command it!”
The voice was thunderous, cold and utterly unmistakable.

Iroh ignored it.

He swung the flaming edged of the wide open tessen clean across Tien Shin’s exposed neck. A shower of blood exploded from the wide and deep wound. Almost instantly the warm, sticky liquid covered him and his victim. Iroh followed up with a slash across his chest and finally, snapping both blades shut, brought a double blow on the elder’s prince’s exposed head. The second of these produced a sickening crack that left no doubt as to its effect.

Tien Shin fell to the ground, his body jerking uncontrollably, as his life blood poured forth onto the tile floor. Iroh fell to his knees next to him, the war fans clattering to the floor.

He breathed heavily as his step-brother’s convulsing body slowed and then stilled.

Slow and deliberate footsteps came up behind him. He looked up. Macro and the palace guards now stood before him. The crowd watched in terrified silence from the archways.

“What is the meaning of this outrage, General Iroh?” his father’s voice demanded.

Iroh did not reply. He stared at the now silent corpse of his opponent. He felt cold and weak.

More footsteps, smaller and lighter than his fathers. A woman appeared in a beautiful gown of red and orange, a pair of golden Fire Nation pins holding her hair, and stepped past Iroh.

Lady Ila knelt before the broken body of her son. Ignoring his killer and the blood and gore of his defeat, she lifted him up into her arms and hugged him. Some in the audience began to cry at this simple display.

“Answer me!” the Fire Lord bellowed.

Iroh turned to face his destiny. The Fire Lord stood flanked by Ozai and Gan.

“Father…” he began in a slurred, heavy voice, “He killed Xian… at Lake Myojin… I found a letter he wrote to Lady Ila but could never send…”

Lady Ila did not reply. She ignored everyone as she cradled the body of her dead son.

“General,” Azulon replied in a slow, deadly tone, “No matter the reason, you have engaged in agni kai and used deadly force within the bounds of the palace itself!”

“This was no agni kai, my Lord,” Macro inserted in a loud, strong voice, “General Iroh offered no challenge and none was accepted.”

A ripple ran through the crowd.

The Fire Lord loomed imperiously over the bloody body of his son.

“Is this true?”

“Yes, father.”

The sun set, the last rays of light winking out as the last edge of the burning orb sunk beneath the horizon.

“You have condemned yourself, General.”
“Father, Tien Shin was a murderer! I have the evidence! Let me show you!”

Lady Ila spoke, anguish and hatred burning in her eyes.

“A murderer?” she cried, “As you have shown yourself to be?”

Turning to her husband, still cradling the broken body of her son, she cried.

“Husband! I ask only the ancient law be honored! I do not seek revenge! Revenge will not bring my son back from the spirit world!” then turning back to Iroh, her eyes burning with hatred, “but let Iroh’s fate be a lesson to those who would dishonor the Fire Nation!”

The Fire Lord regarded his son evenly.

“Bring him,” he commanded, “and see to the body Prince Tien Shin and the others.”

Macro and another guard strode forward and gently helped Iroh to his feet. Others helped Lady Ila cover the body of her son and prepare it for transport. The slain guards were picked up from where they had fallen by their comrades.

The crowd erupted in a thousand conversations. The fight had only last minutes, but news of it had already spread throughout the palace. Within hours it would be all over the capital, spread by the same cheap periodicals that had so effectively heralded the great victory at Mequon.

The guards forced a path through the crowd for the Fire Lord’s party. Within minutes they arrived at Iroh’s apartment. The troopers flung open the doors and the party immediately entered. The reception room was empty as were the other rooms.

A search of the dressing room revealed nothing. The overturned writing desk and the broken teapot remained where Iroh remembered them. The scrolls were gone.

The servants were summoned. Both quaked with fear as Macro questioned them harshly. Neither had entered the apartment after Iroh had dismissed them in such anger. Macro released them.

“Nothing, my Lord,” Macro reported after the guards had rifled the whole apartment.

The Fire Lord had remained impassive during the proceedings, his arms crossed before him. Ozai and Gan wore inscrutable expressions for different reasons.

“Where is this evidence then?”

“I don’t know father,” Iroh confessed sadly.

Iroh explained the coded letter and the cipher key.

“I don’t know where the letters came from or how they got there. I acted on them in anger without thinking,” he lowered his head, “I am a fool.”

“Yes, my son,” Azulon agreed without a trace of sympathy, “and we all shall suffer for it, for your actions have left me no choice but to apply the law.”

“Don’t you believe me, father?”

“Yes,” Azulon replied harshly, “but what does that matter? You have committed kinslaying outside of agni kai – in front of the entire capital! You have wantonly slain innocent guardsmen charged with the protection of the palace! You must know that protect the integrity of my rule I must act as
the impartial arbiter of justice! Especially with my own family!”

“Yes, Iroh, you have proven yourself a fool, but I swear that from this moment you will have all the time you need to grow wise – and suffering will be your teacher! I will send you to an island so small the tides won’t even know of its existence! Ten minutes from end to end, I promise you! You will know every stone and blade of grass before your first sunset. There you can reflect on your foolishness and wonder at the fates of your friends in a world at war! A war you could have stopped!”

Iroh bowed his head.

“General Iroh,” the Fire Lord began again formally, “you have committed a crime of passion rather than premeditation, and but for that you would have earned death. However, you have slain a kinsman in the Royal Palace without cause. You have slain loyal members of the palace guard without cause.”

“Therefore… I sentence you to be stripped of all rank and command, that you be dishonorably discharged the service and suffer exile from our lands as the common criminal you have shown yourself to be.”

“Have you anything to say?”


He lowered his gaze.

*I’m sorry, Rhiannon, I’m sorry my love, but you’re safe now. Safe.*

“No, father.”

Iron clasps clicked around his wrists and he felt the weight of heavy chain that would be his constant companion for years to come.
Chapter Summary

The story ends... but the war goes on.

A week had passed and Iroh’s wounds had begun to heal. The news of his impending exile had broken across the land like the wave that had devastated the army at Lake Myojin. Many had received the news during the very feasts given in honor of his triumph.

Shock and sorrow spread far and wide, for the fall of the hero from such commanding heights was so swift and devastating that none could fully comprehend what had happened. For a brief moment Iroh had become the hope and savior of a nation exhausted by war and driven deep in despair. Now, they feared, he would soon be gone and all the good that he had ever done would be swept away.

Thousands lined the docks as he entered the harbor to board the ship that would deliver him to captivity. He was kept in an iron carriage driven by prison guards. Macro and a company of palace guards rode komodo rhinos in front and behind.

The Fire Lord and the rest of the family would not see him off. He was a criminal.

Many in the throng were soldiers who had marched with him in the triumph only the day before. They had woken up from drunken revels to learn that their beloved leader had fallen in the most spectacular and unexpected way imaginable.

They yelled from the sidelines as his carriage passed. Unlike the day before when the tumult had been happy, celebratory and infused with flowers and glorious music, today’s assemblage was filled with cries of lament and bitter tears, as if they had themselves lost a brother or son. They all felt the hope Iroh had brought going with him.

“We heard, Gen’ral!” Iroh heard a soldier from the outer islands yell, “We knows he done it! Ye did the right thing, ya did!”

“Long live General Iroh!” others cried through tears.

The carriage bounced along over the narrow cobblestone causeway that allowed access to the quays. When it stopped he lifted his head from his hands where he had listened to the clanking of his chains as the vehicle had traveled.

The door opened to reveal bright sunlight. A pair of guards stood on either side of the door. Macro stood beyond, his armor bright.

“She armed!” Macro commanded quietly.

He applied no honorific, for Iroh’s titles had been stripped, but his tone retained respect. Whatever games Macro had played, he had lost his benefactor and now tread carefully. As his prisoner’s experience demonstrated, Fate was capricious, its turns often sudden and violent.

Iroh stood and descended the solitary step onto the street.
The guards formed up behind him as Macro led the way to the bare, lonely transport that awaited.

Dimly Iroh recalled the arrest of Master Chen and wondered if he looked now as his friend’s master had looked then.

Gan and to his great relief, Chieng awaited him at the jetty. As soon as he exited the carriage the slight engineer ran to him as she had on the steppes, her black hair flailing about her shoulders. She embraced him and buried her face in his chest. The guards moved to push Iroh along, but Macro signaled them to allow it.

The crowd looked on in silence with tears of sympathy and downcast faces.

“I’m coming with you!” she vowed.

“No!” he replied, his body tensing painfully at the thought, “You can’t! I won’t let you! You’re needed here!”

“No, I’m not! I want to be with you!”

“I want to be with you, so much!” he admitted, his voice thick, “I want a life with you! Wait for me! I swear I will return, somehow, I will return!”

She hugged him fiercely and fresh tears sprang from her eyes.

“I love you! I want a life with you too! I don’t want anything else!”

“We belong to each other then, Ten-Ten,” he vowed, the chains of his servitude clanking as they slid heavily across her back, “you are my love, my only one!”

“Yes, I am yours, Iroh… if you will have me! And though I’ve hated that name my whole life I give it to you and only you to call me!”

He hugged her close and lifted her off her feet. Then he put her back down, ran his hands through her hair and kissed her. She deepened the kiss and ran her hands through his hair in return.

They released each other. He could barely rip himself away from her golden eyes to turn to his friend.

Gan stood close by, tears welling at what he had just witnessed. He walked up and hugged Iroh himself.

“All good things come to an end, don’t they?” Iroh asked in irony as he returned the gesture, his voice still threatening to break.

Gan did not trust himself to reply.

“Take care of yourself, my friend,” Iroh begged, “Please, look after her and Rhiannon if you can!”

“They don’t need it, Iroh, but I will, I promise.”

Gan released him and stepped back to stand beside Chieng.

“She will be heartbroken when she hears,” Iroh confessed through tears.

“I know, but she is prepared for this more than we could ever possibly be… and while you live, there is hope,” Gan replied.
Iroh nodded bitterly and turned back to his mate. Her took her hands in his and kissed them.

“Please, my love, have mercy on Rhiannon! Help her if you can!” he pleaded. “She’s alone now, and she’s the only sister I will ever have. She’ll blame herself for this and it’s not… it’s not her fault. It was my choice to protect you… and her… and Gan. She saved us all, just as Nikon did, but she will punish herself so badly for it!”

“Governor T’zan is strong and brave, Iroh,” she replied in a comforting and confident voice, “and she will have a friend in me for life, I promise. That was Nikon’s greatest gift to me.”

She looked down.

“That fool,” she reflected with bitterness, “he showed me that friends are the only things worth having… then popped off and got himself killed.”

He hugged her once more.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Gan asked.

Chieng looked up to hear Iroh’s response.

“Planasia.”

Chieng and Gan exchanged a glance, wiped the tears from their eyes and nodded to each other.

“We’ll find it,” Gan vowed.

“No heroics, Gan,” Iroh commanded, then to Liu’s daughter, “and nothing from you either, my love! Promise me!”

She declined with a smile. Gan crossed his arms in front of him.

“I’m not sure we’ll need to Iroh,” he replied, successfully avoiding a commitment as well, “We’ll see how the war goes without you… without us.”

Iroh looked back and forth between them.

“You can’t just quit because of me,” he commanded them sternly, “Chieng, you must go forward with the new tank designs, no matter what happens to me! Victory for the Fire Nation is more important than this silly drama! Our soldiers can’t pay the –”

Chieng shook her head and smiled once more. He loved her smile. How quickly he had become accustomed to the smile she radiated only for him. He tried as they spoke to drive the image permanently into his memory. The real article would be far behind soon enough.

“Already corrected,” she assured him, “I have a good solution that will save many lives, but,” she continued, her expression hardening, “I will design no more weapons until you are released. I don’t give a god damn what my father says.”

They kissed once more and separated.

Macro stepped forward. It was time to go.

The crowd waited expectantly for Iroh to address them. He raised his manacled hands to point at the thousands of soldiers and common citizens who stood around them. Macro considered the implicit request, then nodded once more.
Iroh stepped up onto a small crate so his voice could carry father. He addressed his followers in a loud, confident voice. Many of the faces he saw had been among the mutineers who refused to cross the desert. Back then they had to be convinced of his leadership. Now there was no doubt. Young as he was, they looked up to him as a father.

“Comrades, we have been through much together. We have known victory, defeat and everything in between. We began our journey young in mind and heart. That innocence is gone, but we have learned much about ourselves and the world, knowledge paid for with our dearest blood.

Today I go into exile, but yet I live. Do not grieve for me when so many of our best never returned home at all. Remember them, keep them close in your hearts and minds as I do and celebrate the victory we won together for the sake of the Fire Nation!

For myself I can only say this. I never knew what honor meant until I served with you. Now, I know, the greatest honor I have had in my life was the command of the Army of the Great Divide. If Agni smiles on me once more, it would be my privilege to lead you wonderful people into battle… anytime… anywhere.”

Iroh scanned the enormous throng once more.

He saluted, his chains making a clinking sound of metal against metal. Thousands of soldiers returned the salute, their arms and hands filling the air with the sound of their uniform motion.

“Hail, General Iroh!” they cried in unison.

They repeated the cheer twice more as he boarded the prison ship, a sadder and wiser man than when he and his friends had embarked for Gela so long ago, to serve his exile in a lonely, foreign land.

“And so it was, most noble guests,” the storyteller at long last concluded, “though he found himself in exile most bitter, weighed down by the chains of servitude, this was not the end for General Iroh. In truth, his story was just beginning, and as the ship bearing him across the sea slipped from sight, he did but turn another page.”

The audience, sensing that the story was nearing its end, had roused itself to hear the characters final goodbyes. Enemy though they were, the universal and everlasting themes of star crossed lovers separated by forces beyond their control, of vows of friendship and loyalty in circumstances most dire, had their effect on the assembled guests.

Gao ended his speech with a flourish and low bow to the master of the house who stood up, tears running down his enormous jowls, and began clapping loudly. The rest of the audience did the same.

Iroh, stony faced despite a few tears that had escaped his discipline, pulled his nephew up by the arm in imitation of their neighbors.

The storyteller bowed once in each cardinal direction before returing to look upon his benefactor.

The applause was long and genuine, and Gao smiled broadly knowing he had pleased his audience.

“My dear old man!” Trimazu began once the clapping had subsided, “I must admit you have earned your enormous fee! Your skill and passion are without parallel and you are truly a master of a most difficult craft!”
“I am honored, Master Trimazu, I know your standards are high.”

“They are, but you have exceeded them!” he congratulated in genuine admiration, “You have captivated your audience and made my party once again the envy of the four plains region! It is as if General Iroh himself was brought before us tonight!”

The fat man turned to his lowly guests.

“Isn’t that right, Xian?”

Iroh looked down at the floor, declining to make eye contact with his host. The silence stretched a moment too long, prompting the old storyteller to make inquiry.

“Pardon, was the story not to your liking?”

The retired general started slightly, knowing he must make some kind of response.

“Uh, no, Master Gao, it was… a tremendous story and well told. Forgive me, sir, I am old, and I myself was young in those days.” Iroh laughed quietly and continued, “When you reach our age, it is often painful to remember one’s youth, isn’t it?”

The storyteller smiled once again, saying, “Yes, friend, you are much wiser than your appearance suggests! Tell me now, like many here you seemed to feel our enemy’s plight at the end, did you feel sympathy then for General Iroh after all he had done to destroy us?”

Iroh’s smile withered. He felt Prince Zuko’s eyes on him. He considered his response and decided on the truth.

“Yes, Master Gao, I did.”

Gao clapped his hands once and bowed extravagantly.

“Then I have succeeded!”

Suddenly the banished prince, unable to contain himself, burst in.

“Wait! Who left Tien Shin’s message in, uh… Prince Iroh’s apartment? How can you finish the story without telling us that!?”

“Oh,” Gao responded slyly, turning his head and putting a finger to the side of his nose, “Hadn’t you guessed?”

“No,” came the acidic and impatient reply, “Or I wouldn’t have asked!”

Trimazu regarded the banished prince out of the corner of his eye as Gao furnished a response.

“Why, Prince Ozai, of course.”

The scarred young man’s chest heaved in anger.

“That’s a lie! My…” he was stifled by Iroh’s light step on his foot, “I mean, how could that be? Why would he do something like that? Didn’t Tien Shin do it?”

Zuko looked back and forth between the storyteller and his uncle.

“Well, some believe the elder prince did indeed plant the letter, hoping to excite Iroh to attempted
murder, which is of course what happened,” Gao stroked his beard in thought, “but I myself believe it happened as I have related. Tien Shin was much too careful to risk direct combat with the likes of Iroh.”

Prince Zuko looked down, a look of sullen displeasure on his face.

“Well,” Trimazu segued, “let’s wrap this up, eh?”

The fat man beamed a wide smile and clapped twice.

A servant appeared from nowhere.

“Yes, your Corpulence?”

“Bring forth the payment!” he boomed.

“Oh, stones and scree,” chided Chen Ho, “do you ever tire of thinking up new and improved ways to debase yourself, Trimazu?”

“No, my friend, besides you know I’m doing you a favor satisfying your curiosity!” he continued in his conspiratorial tone, “You really should be thanking me.”

“What does it matter at this point, Ho?” Tao offered, “We might as well indulge ourselves since he obviously won’t let us escape without shoving it in our face.”

Chen Ho groaned in reply.

Moments later two servants appeared pushing a tiny wheelbarrow filled with gold coins.

“Five thousand gold pieces!” Trimazu cackled in glee, jabbing a fat finger at the obscene pile of lucre.

Gao’s eyes, bulging noticeably, bowed low with an elegant flourish.

“You are truly generous, lord!”

“I am! I am! I gladly pay you five times the amount agreed for the best holiday entertainment I have ever had the pleasure to offer my most noble guests!”

The audience ogled the small mountain of wealth with undisguised desire, but everyone clapped once more as the storyteller was escorted out the way he had entered, his massive fee in tow.

“Now get the hell out of here, Gao!” Trimazu shouted at the thin man’s retreating form, “before one of my less than scrupulous “guests” robs you on the way out to pay off their enormous debts to me with my own money!”

Gao, taking him at his word, batted the servants out of the way and vacated the room immediately pushing his massive load.

Trimazu turned to address the assembly.

“Now, my friends, I daresay you have dined well and been spoiled with a rare and unusual tale! Go now in peace and friendship – and tell your neighbors how much fun you had!”

The master of the house roared in good natured laughter and was joined by his guests.
Conversations erupted around the room as the audience broke from their tables. Dawn would soon arrive and the guests, sleepy and full, made ready to depart, to spread word of the outrageous acts, generous table and fantastic entertainment of Trimazu’s pleasure palace to all those who poor unfortunates who had not been invited.

As the crowd streamed from the chamber, Chen Ho and Tao stood ready to thank their extravagant host.

“So, my friends, I am so glad you favored me with your attendance. I trust the evening was well spent?”

“Don’t be a fool, Trimazu,” Ho replied in his customarily acidic tone, “you know the truth as well as I. Everyone knows you delight in lending others money so you can abuse them in every possible manner, especially by requiring attendance at these disgusting “events”, but what you obviously don’t get is that the real reason we put up with you is so we have someone to look down upon. No further evidence of our superiority is needed than you.”

“A shame then, my lord Ho,” Trimazu replied without batting an eyelash, “that my power is such that you feel compelled to attend no matter your sentiment. I look forward to seeing you at my next celebration.”

Chen Ho snorted.

“The only way to end this war quickly is to threaten the Fire Lord with an invitation to one your parties, Trimazu.”

The fat man laughed.

“Oh, the trouble with you, Chen,” he replied in wry amusement and using his neighbor’s given name for the first time Iroh could recall, “is that you never get any fun out of life.”

“All right, I understand,” the thin noble acknowledged in impotent frustration, “but could you just stop being such an ass about all of it?”

“Haha! My friend, you ask too much of me. You have your pomp and circumstance – and I have your pomp and circumstance! Surely you don’t mind sharing? Mmmm?”

Chen Ho shook his head and waved an arm in a gesture of both farewell and defeat.

Trimazu turned to Tao Lin.

“Well! I hope you’ve had a better time than my dear Lord Ho has, Governor!”

“I suppose I have, Master Trimazu,” Tao agreed, “For myself I thank you for a most enjoyable evening.”

The austere governor turned to the two erstwhile day laborers.

“Well met, Xian… Li, I wish you success wherever the journey of life takes you.”

Iroh bowed, followed a fraction of a second later by Zuko.

“The honor is ours, Lord Governor,” Iroh replied, “to share a table with you this evening.”

Tao departed.
The dining hall was almost empty. Trimazu turned to his two saviors.

“Well, Xian, we have had quite an evening!”

Iroh, exhausted beyond all endurance, could not help but agree.

“Yes, my lord, quite an evening.”

The portly merchant looked on Iroh with sympathy.

“You’re exhausted, my friend, aren’t you? Of course you are, you labored all day, fought a battle for me at dusk, and stayed up all night listening to tales of war in a far off land.”

Iroh’s eyelids drooped.

“Yes, lord… you have been most generous.”

“Sleep then now,” the obese merchant commanded quietly, “enjoy the rest you have earned.”

The merchant clapped his hands once more. A servant, silent and ubiquitous, appeared at his right hand.

“Take our honored guests to the west wing and see they are well treated.”

Iroh bowed to his host, his young charge stiffly following suit.

As they travelled the wide, well lit corridors of the villa, Iroh and his nephew fell behind the servant leading them. Soon they found themselves alone for the first time that evening.

“Is it true, uncle? Did my father…?” the banished prince asked in a bitter, quiet voice.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe he did?”

Iroh sighed.

“Yes… but it doesn’t matter now.”

They walked in silence before Zuko finally continued.

“I have so many questions, uncle.”

“They will have to wait,” Iroh responded as they approached the door to their chamber.

The room was simple, but the beds were comfortable. In moments, they were asleep.

The afternoon sun streamed through the window.

Zuko opened his eyes to see his uncle already prepared to leave. He rubbed his eyes. He had slept heavily, but he found he was still tired.

“What time is it?”
“Time to leave,” his guardian responded.

The banished prince suddenly perked up.

“Trouble?”

“No,” the retired general responded, “but I think it would be best if we slipped away quietly.”

Zuko nodded.

Clean clothes had been laid out for them both. Iroh had already changed and Zuko quickly followed suit.

Fixing their round, straw hats on their heads, they exited the bedchamber into a long, empty hallway. Less ornate than the reception hall or the vast audience chamber they had dined in the night before, it was nevertheless impressive in its size and length.

They headed the opposite way they had come and exited the hallway into a large, grass covered courtyard. A riding ring dominated the enclosure, but no people or ostrich horses were about. Two small, metal doors graced the far end. Iroh pointed at them and set off in their direction, his nephew in tow.

Iroh grabbed the handle on the first door and twisted. The locking mechanism clanked and the retired general opened the door, its rusty hinges screaming in protest.

He stepped through. Zuko stepped through behind him. Beyond lay a vast, unspoilt countryside populated with evergreens.

A crossbow appeared at the nape of Iroh’s neck.

They suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen men dressed in the dark green uniforms of the Earth Kingdom. All had crossbows aimed at them.

“Leaving so soon, Xian?” a familiar, booming voice questioned.

Iroh turned to see the Merchant of Shanxi standing before him. The finery he wore that morning was nowhere in sight. He wore a simple green tunic and black trousers. In his hand he carried a scroll with red stoppers.

“I would have thought you would at least have offered thanks before departing.”

“Forgive us, lord,” Iroh begged, “We did not wish to disturb your slumber.”

“Why are you doing this!?” Zuko injected hotly, “Why are you threatening us? We’ve done nothing to you!”

Trimazu eyed the banished prince.

“Correct, Li,” the fat man agreed, “You saved my life and I still owe you thanks for that, but there is this other matter to attend.”

He produced the scroll and opened it. It was a copy of the “wanted” poster that Azula had distributed after they had escaped her trap.

Iroh and his charge stiffened slightly at the revelation.
“How strange that I should have guests who so closely resemble the fugitive Prince Zuko and the mighty General Iroh himself visit my humble abode.”

The silence stretched. Zuko and Iroh scanned the armed men around them, silently and independently calculated their chances of survival. Both had assumed bending stances, though they and their opponents scarcely recognized it.

Iroh regarded their host. Gone was the silly and boisterous buffoon, miraculously replaced by the countenance of a shrewd and resolute personality of steel.

“What happens now, my lord?” Iroh finally inquired.

The merchant considered this and replied.

“What always happens, Xian, I make the best decision I can with the information I have.”

He signaled his men to lower their crossbows.

“For all my fortune I am a small man, Xian,” the fat man confided in a circumspect tone, “and though I can see the resemblance, I suppose I was mistaken…”

He rolled the scroll back up and placed it in his waistband. He approached Iroh and handed him a small purse.

“Here, take this small gift, and may the Earth Spirit guide you and your nephew to your destiny.”

Iroh looked into the hard, resolute eyes of the merchant and replied in a low voice.

“You would take such a risk, Master Trimazu?”

“Risk is a part of life, Xian, as you know even better than I.”

Trimazu scanned the landscape around them and continued in wistful tone.

“The tale of the Avatar’s return has spread far and wide. The battle at the North Pole… perhaps, the first of many.”

He met Iroh’s gaze once more.

“Wherever General Iroh and the banished prince may be…I feel they yet have a part to play in the shape of things to come.”

Iroh considered this.

“You are wise, my lord.”

“Wise or not, my decision is made.”

Iroh and Zuko left the Merchant of Shanxi as they had found him, on foot, traveling a dusty, nameless road, strangers in a strange land.

The infamous villa of the Merchant of Shanxi lay far behind them. The sun was close to the horizon before Zuko emerged from his melancholy to question his guardian about the fantastic events of the
night before. For the first time he felt small and insignificant next to the man he had often treated so poorly.

“Was all that true, uncle? Did it really happen that way?”

Iroh was prepared for the questions and answered without hesitation.

“Yes, much of it anyway.”

“Grandfather really banished you?”

“He did.”

“Is that… is that why you came with me when father banished me?”

Iroh considered this.

“No, nephew, I came with you because I love you.”

Zuko stiffened at the simple admission.

“But it’s not fair! You were exiled without any way to regain your honor!”

“Life isn’t fair, Prince Zuko.”

“So you just… went to Planasia then?”

“Yes,” Iroh replied bitterly, “though I did not remain there long.”

“What happened then, uncle?”

“The worst possible outcome.”

“What do you mean?”

Iroh looked ahead, his expression distant, and replied.

“The war went on.”

FINIS

A/N: Well, it is done then. I hope you’ve enjoyed the story. I didn’t know how I’d react when I penned the last words. I thought I’d cry or be very sad. As it happens, I’m not. I’ve lived with these characters and this story for ten years. They are as real to me as my family and friends. As long as I live, they will live, vibrant and colourful, for all time.

Acastus

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