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Novella

From **Ash**
Comes
FIRE

R. T. Kaelin

From Ash Comes Fire

An



Novella

R.T. Kaelin

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Ember



A human in tattered robes nears the mountain's peak. His steps are slow, his feet dragging. Sweat drips from his sunburned brow.

A simple house sits beneath a crooked crag of black rock. Four figures lounge on the home's porch, comfortable in the outcropping's bountiful shade. They watch the human draw near, silent and motionless. When he is but a single step from shadow's sweet relief, the sandy-brown kerran lifts her hand, her fur-covered fingers gnarled like knotted driftwood. Dark gray stripes covering her neck and face and the scruffy white fur around her mouth clearly mark her age.

The man stops and waits.

And waits.

The four on the porch say nothing. They merely stare.

A vulture's screech pulls the man's gaze upward where a single bird glides, its black wings outstretched and rigid against the sky's brilliant blue. Beads of sweat trickle down his neck, sneak past his collar, and roll down his spine. A breeze so slight that it offers no relief drifts over the mountainside.

Suddenly, the old kerran speaks, her voice dry and rough like the sandy ash beneath his sandaled feet. "You appear hot."

The man's gaze drops from the vulture to the woman. "The sun is warm today."

The elf sitting beside the woman lifts the red clay jug resting in his lap and takes three long gulps. The man licks his dust-caked lips, watching water dribble down the elf's chin before dripping to the wooden floor.

After lowering the jug, the elf clears his throat and speaks, his voice brash and gruff. "You appear thirsty."

The man urges his words past his parched throat and tongue. "The air is dry."

From Ash Comes Fire

Another dal, the middle member of the elven trio, leans forward in his chair. His skin is a shade lighter than that of his compatriot, the color of churned cream. His voice is soothing, soft and gentle like the harbor sea at dawn. "You appear tired."

The man stands a little taller, ignoring his sore muscles and raw skin. "The climb was arduous."

The third elf, slimmer than her companions, eyes the man, a pensive frown on her lips. She studies him, inspecting the creases in his face, the sizable crescent scar on his jaw, the yearning in his eyes. She clears her throat and speaks, her voice as crisp and clean as the desert air after a winter shower. "You appear lost."

The man tilts his head, his sun-chapped lips cracking as he smiles ever so slightly. "I am exactly where I need to be."

Ojin, winter

~Decades upon decades later~

“Wake up!”

Qora Gamysh’s eyes shot open at the urgent whisper, fear and confusion coursing through her. Arri loomed over her in the dark, one hand clasped on her mouth, the other gripping her shoulder while shaking her. His eyes were wide, burning with a swirling mix of panic and determination.

“Say nothing and do exactly as I say. Do you understand?”

Qora was about to smack her brother’s hand away, demanding to know who he thought he was, when she caught the faint echo of screams outside their family’s workshop.

Arri must have taken her momentary pause as acquiescence to his order. He removed his hand from her mouth and dragged her from her bed, leading her to the shop’s rear.

Feeling wetness on her face, Qora wiped a hand over her mouth and pulled it back to discover it streaked with blood. She briefly thought it was her own before spotting her brother’s bare arms and hands coated red. “What happened to you? Are you hurt?”

“What?” Arri glanced back and then followed her gaze to

his arms. Anger clouded his face. "I'm fine." He tugged her arm and increased their pace, stepping into the rear room of the workshop where her twin brother, Koan, stood in a pool of moonlight by the wide-open back door.

"So that's not blood?" asked Qora.

"It is. Just...not mine."

"Then whose?"

When Arri's only response was to grip her wrist tighter and yank her to the back door, she ripped her arm free and skidded to a stop. "Tell me what's going on!" Even though the twins had entered their eighteenth year last winter, Arri—a mere four years their elder—treated them like children. He expected the type of obedience Qora reserved only for their father.

Arri spun around and swiftly advanced on her, tiny muscles rippling along his jaw as he clenched his teeth. "You hear that, don't you?" he hissed, jabbing a pointed finger toward the open door. Screams, wood smoke, and the desert's chilly nighttime air drifted through the entryway.

"Of course I—"

"Raiders," interrupted Arri. "From the sea."

Qora's confusion and fear surged. "Raiders?" Her gaze shot to the door. "Here?"

Arri reclaimed his bloody grip on her arm and guided her to the door. "We need to leave. *Now.*"

Qora finally understood her brother's sense of urgency. Glancing around the darkened workshop, she asked, "Where's father?" When no answer was forthcoming, she looked to her brothers and, for the first time, noticed tears streaking Koan's face. With worry bubbling inside her, she repeated her question. "Arri? Where is father?"

Whereas Koan pressed his lips together and turned his head away, Arri met her insistent stare head on. "He's..." He paused before letting out a quick sigh. His stern countenance fell away, his eyes brimming with sadness. "I'm sorry, Qora, but he's dead."

Qora blinked several times, unable to comprehend and accept her brother's answer. "I don't understand..."

From Ash Comes Fire

“We were about to go to bed when we heard the shouting about ships in the harbor. On our way to the docks, we turned a corner and there...there stood a man with a sword. He didn’t say a word, the bastard just—” Arri cut off, his voice cracking. “He ran father through. Just like that. I grabbed a bucket and bashed it over the butcher’s head, but... father... well...” Trailing off, he stood a little straighter and set his jaw. “I promised him I’d keep you two safe.” A hardened coldness entered his eyes. “So, both of you be quiet and follow me.” After a quick glance up and down the alley, he stepped into the night. “Let’s go.”

Koan followed at once, leaving a numb Qora no choice but to do the same.

The trio dashed through the smoky, oddly deserted streets, clinging to the shadows as best they could. The screams of her neighbors were growing more infrequent. As they ran, Qora caught glimpses of buildings aflame to the west. Beyond the fires, she spotted ship masts and moonlit sails in the harbor. The raiders’ banner—a dark flag emblazoned with the soft yellow emblem of a fist claspng a barbed trident—distracted her so that she tripped over a burlap sack and stumbled. Koan grabbed her arm, steadying her, his grip so tight she winced. She would have bruises tomorrow, assuming they lived through the night.

Shooting a grateful look at her twin, she found his attention fixed on the sand-covered street behind them. His typically flat, black hair was mussed and wild, his dark brown eyes round and alert. Looking back, she caught a flicker of movement. Or at least she thought she did. The smoke choking the village paired with meager light from the waxing crescent moon played tricks on her eyes.

“This way!”

Arri’s hissed order, an urgent blend of shout and whisper, grabbed Qora’s attention just in time to spot their elder brother ducking into a dark alleyway. She let out a quiet curse as she and Koan sprinted after Arri. Dashing into the shadows between a warehouse and a glassblower’s shop, the caustic aroma of coal soot smacked her in the face.

Running through Ojin's soft, sandy streets had left her gasping for air. One deep breath of the vented smoke started her coughing. She slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the quiet hacking as she squatted with Arri behind a wood-slat crate.

Koan dropped to a knee beside her and leaned back, peering around the box. "I don't think it's safe to use the north or south roads. They'll probably be blocked."

Arri ran a hand through his thick black hair, pulling at it in frustration. "I know..."

"Then where do we go?" asked Koan, scooting behind the crate again. "What do we do?"

"Shut your mouth and give me a moment to think!"

"Think quickly." Koan nodded back to the alley entrance. "Something's coming."

Qora shut her eyes and urged herself to wake up. She wanted this to be a dream, an awful, all-too-real dream. There were no soldiers to protect against an assault like this. The raiders had free reign to do as they pleased and take as much time as they wanted.

Arri stood, kicking up sand and gravel. "Let's go."

"Hold on," snapped Koan, grabbing Arri's arm. "What's the plan?"

"For now?" whispered Arri. "We keep moving. And if you saw raiders *that* way, then we're going *this* way!" He pointed deeper into the alley. "Now—" he ripped his arm free—"follow me and keep quiet!" Arri headed into the shadows, striding with purpose.

Qora watched him for a moment before tugging a scowling Koan to his feet. Side-by-side they jogged after Arri, dodging crates and piles of fine sand.

Upon reaching the alley's end, the siblings stopped, pressing their backs against a stone wall. Arri peeked around the corner and raised a hand, his palm facing them. Qora's heart thudded in her chest, her back soaking in the day's leftover heat as she listened to the screams of friends and neighbors. Mixed among the panicked cries were the raiders' voices, forceful and demanding.

From Ash Comes Fire

Without looking back, Arri whispered, "The street's clear. For now, at least." He motioned to an alley across the way and a hundred paces to the south. "That's where we're going. You ready?"

Koan indicated another alley straight across from them. "Why not that one? It's closer."

Arri jutted his chin at the first alley. "Because that one leads to Moran's shop."

Koan, his brow knitted with confusion, muttered, "And why are we going to—?"

Arri ended the debate, grabbing Koan's arm and dragging him into the street while hissing, "Come on, Qora!"

Stepping to the wall's edge, Qora peeked around the corner. The street sat empty save for the smoke from the fires near the harbor. She bolted from the alley, chasing after her brothers, her sandaled feet kicking up sand.

Arri led the way, ducking into the shadows of the large awnings jutting from most of Ojin's buildings and then turned south, hugging the walls. Qora glanced through each open-air window they passed. Every home and shop sat empty, dark, and quiet. Qora frowned, wondering if the raiders had passed through here already.

Once they reached Arri's chosen alley, the siblings slipped into the shadows and navigated the narrow passageway, stopping at the side entrance to Moran's shop. Arri took his time opening the door—the desert air dried out everything, even hinge oil—yet his caution was unnecessary. The wood-paneled door opened noiselessly and the trio ducked inside.

A noxious aroma of newly tanned animal hide choked the air. Gagging on the fumes, Qora almost yearned for the smoke of the glassblower's furnace. Moonlight streamed through the single window in the shop's front wall, revealing two waist-high stacks of hide. Various tables and workbenches filled the room, covered with strips of cut leather, tiny metal rivets, buckles, awls, punches, and knives, all strewn about haphazardly.

Koan shut the door behind them and muttered, "What a mess..."

Arri was already across the darkened workshop, standing at the door that led to the front room. He cracked it open and mumbled a curse. Pushing the door the rest of the way, he glanced back at the twins. "Don't just stand there. Come on!" With that, he left the rear of the workshop.

The twins began to hurry through the room, careful to avoid bumping into or tripping over anything. Halfway across, Koan whispered, "Any idea why we're here?"

Qora shrugged her shoulders. "Ask Arri."

"I tried that," Koan grumbled, pausing beside a workbench just long enough to grab a large awl. The thin metal rod extruding from the wooden bulb of a handle flashed, reflecting a bit of moonlight.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking something pointed and sharp with me," replied Koan as he headed for the front room.

Qora let out a short sigh, scanned a nearby bench, and picked up a flathead hammer poking out from a misshapen piece of leather. After testing its weight, she hurried after her brothers. Stepping through the open doorway, she immediately skidded to a stop beside Koan, joining him in gaping at the two bodies on the floor. Her stomach lurched, bile bubbling up to coat the back of her throat.

Moran lay on his back, his blood-soaked hands clasped over his throat, his wide-open, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling. Alvari, his wife, was sprawled out beside him, face down in a glistening puddle of blood.

While she and her twin stood statue-still, Arri was patrolling the walls, perusing the sundries hanging from wooden pegs. "Look for waterskins," he ordered. "As many as you can find." When neither twin moved or responded, he glared across the room. "Waterskins! *Now!*"

Koan finally pried his gaze from the macabre scene. "Where's Reh and Throl?" The only other twins in Ojin, Moran and Alvari's sons were in their sixteenth winter, two years younger than the Gamysh pair.

"Gone," muttered Arri.

"How do you know?" asked Qora. "They might be hiding."

Arri pointed to the floor near the shop's front door. "They're not."

For the first time, Qora noticed the dark, glistening footprints leading from the blood puddles and through the open door. There were three sets of large ones—boots or sandals—along with two pair of bare feet, smudged and streaked. Qora's heart sank.

"Why kill Moran and Alvari but drag the boys away?" wondered Koan.

"Why does it matter?" Arri spun around and resumed his rushed study of the items on the walls. "Now, will you *please* help me find some waterskins?"

A frown crept over Qora's face as she realized what Arri was planning. "You're taking us into the sands, aren't you?"

Arri glanced back, briefly met her gaze, and then returned to his search. While he never responded with words, the look in his eyes was answer enough.

Koan, his eyebrows arching high, whispered in disbelief, "The sands of Ro? Are you mad?"

"Keep your voice down!" whispered Arri, shooting a worried glance out the open door and into the street. "I'm quite sane. The roads out of town won't be safe."

Koan advanced on their brother. "We could head to the harbor, take a boat—"

"And what?" scoffed Arri. "Sail past the *blasted raider ships* floating in the harbor?" He shook his head. "No. We must head west, sands or no sands."

"We'll be dead in two days out there!"

Arri nostrils flared. "Stay here and we'll be dead *tonight!* Now, stop arguing with me and—" His gaze fixed on something behind the Qora. Pressing his lips together, he brushed past Koan. "I must be blind..."

Looking over her shoulder, Qora found three leather bags the length of her arm, each one a rounded sack at one end that funneled to a hole the diameter of her thumb at the other. A cork stopper hung from a leather thong sewn near

the waterskin's mouth. She removed them from the pegs, handing two to Arri when he arrived beside her

Koan stared at her, his mouth agape. "You're going along with this?"

"With the only chance we have? Yes, I am."

She held Koan's glare, having a silent, near instantaneous conversation with her twin. A connection existed between them, one that was hard to explain to anyone. The only other people in Ojin who had ever understood were the owners of the bloody footprints smeared across the floor.

The scowl on Koan's face deepened, yet in less than a heartbeat, he relented. "Fine." He moved to the open door and carefully poked his head outside.

Arri gave a satisfied nod and stepped to the door, his boots softly scuffing the wood floor. Qora followed. Though she managed to skirt the pool of Alvari's blood, she couldn't help but tread through the sanguinary footprints. As she joined her brothers, Arri handed Koan one of his two empty waterskins.

The trio studied the street. The smoke lay thicker now, its haze obscuring the night, making it impossible to see much beyond two hundred paces. What they could see of the sand-covered way sat empty, save for the stone water well situated a mere twenty paces from the shop's door. Just over ten hands tall and built of snug-fitting brick, the well had a sandstone basin half its height extending outward to form a rectangular trough as long as Qora was tall.

Qora breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted moonlight reflecting off the basin's water. There was enough that they would not need to draw more—a good thing, as every hand pump in Ojin screeched like a wounded vulture.

Arri whispered, "Fill your skins quickly then head into the alley over there." Another shadowy passage awaited them, slightly to the south. "Me, then Qora, then Koan. Stay low and stay *quiet*. You ready?" After quick nods from the twins, he stepped back into the cool night and began jogging toward the well, hunched over like a man bowed by old age.

Qora followed at once, mimicking her brother's posture,

whipping her head back and forth. Koan trailed her, his boots scraping the sand. Clutching her waterskin in one hand and the flathead hammer in the other, she scurried to the well and dropped to a knee. After resting her hammer on the sand, she bent over the basin wall and submerged the skin into the still-warm water, careful not to splash. The three Gamysh siblings set to filling their waterskins in silence, the gentle gurgling of air bubbles escaping from the mouth of the skins interrupted by an occasional scream of a villager in the distance.

Qora's skin filled first, so she jammed the stopper in the mouth and silently urged her brothers to hurry.

Arri nodded at the water and whispered, "Drink. As much as you can."

Seeing the wisdom in his order, she lowered her lips to the basin and began to drink. Koan joined her a moment later, gulping down one mouthful of precious liquid after another. Her stomach was nearly full when she realized Arri had not joined them. She pulled back from the basin, dribbles of water rolling down her chin and neck to find Arri on his feet, staring down the street. His eyebrows were drawn together, worry splitting his forehead.

Looking down the darkened way, Qora spotted a pair of soft lights peeking through the haze, growing brighter by the moment. At first, Qora thought they were candles, but the bluish-white color was all wrong. That, and the distance between them remained fixed.

"Get up!" hissed Arri. "*Now!*"

Despite her brother's urgency, Qora remained frozen in place, transfixed by the lights. The way they moved seemed familiar, although she could not place why. Koan, however, reacted at once, scrambling to his feet and inadvertently kicking sand in her face. She shut her eyes against the grit and upon reopening them, grabbed her hammer and waterskin before rising. As four dark, amorphous shapes emerged from the smoke, the pair of dancing lights both made sense and left her baffled.

They were eyes.

Qora's heart jumped into her throat. She blinked repeatedly, staring at the illumination spilling from the man's sockets. Blue-white flames burned like tiny braziers about where his eyes should be.

A rare gust of wind cleared the haze, whisking away the last vestiges of cover to reveal a quartet of raiders. All were human, all with skin as dark as Qora's own. Three wore ragged clothes; their scraggly hair was long and wild, their beards thick and unkempt. The fourth man was markedly different, even if she were to discount the unnatural, tiny infernos emanating from his eyes.

His manner of dress trumped what Ojin's council head wore on feast days. His loose-fitting shirt was whiter than any fabric had the right to be, his dark breeches—black or a deep blue, Qora could not tell which—were pristine, and his leather boots had been polished to a glossy sheen. Bald and beardless, the moonlight reflected off his shorn pate.

They spotted Qora and her brothers at once. The leader, a sword with a wide, curved blade clasped in his right hand, lifted his left arm and pointed at them. The three ragged raiders began jogging toward the basin.

Qora readied to sprint for the alley, stopping only when Arri grabbed her arm. Reaching down, he snatched the flathead hammer from her hand while at the same time, shoving his sloshing waterskin at Koan's chest. "Take this."

Already gripping his own skin in one hand and the awl from Moran's shop in the other, Koan was forced to clasp Arri's waterskin with his arms. "I can't carry—" He cut off as Arri ripped the pointed leatherworking tool from his grip.

A wild-eyed Arri backed up two steps, hammer clutched in one hand, the awl in the other. "Go! Run for the sands and don't look back!" he snapped, his gaze lingering on each of them for quick heartbeat. He spun around and ran at the raiders, the makeshift weapons at his sides.

For a moment, Qora simply stared after him, too stunned to say or do anything. Two solid thumps and the sound of sloshing water preceded a shocked cry from Koan.

“No!”

The shout jarred her from her stupor. Looking over, she saw that Koan had dropped both waterskins and was making ready to run after Arri. Quicker than a snake’s strike, Qora reached out and snagged Koan’s wrist. “Don’t. We do what he says.”

Koan tugged, trying to free himself. The confusion, desperation, and betrayal swirling in her twin’s burning glare triggered a tidal wave of nauseating guilt. Qora almost released him as the wave crashed over her, pummeling at her brief moment of clarity, threatening to wash it away. Somehow, reason weathered the emotional onslaught and Qora steadied herself.

With a sudden, violent jerk, he tried to rip free again. “Let go of me!”

Qora squeezed even tighter, clamping down and nodding toward the waterskins he had dropped. “Pick them up and let’s go.”

“Arri—”

“Is trying to save us!” barked Qora. “If you go after him, you’re throwing his sacrifice away!”

Koan stared down the street after their brother, his face a mask of heartbreak. Fixing her gaze on him—she worried her will might break if she looked after Arri—Qora lowered her voice and softened her tone. “Honor his choice, Koan.”

It seemed an eternity before Koan responded, although it was only a thudding heartbeat or two. He shut his eyes, squeezing them tight, and gave a single, short nod. Qora released his arm, half-expecting him to bolt after Arri. Instead, he bent down, retrieved both waterskins, and stood tall, locking his brown eyes on hers. “Let’s go.” Stepping past her, he sprinted toward the alley.

Qora followed, entering the buildings’ shadows without looking back. Had she done so, she doubted she would have seen much through the tears.



Spark



The man stands in the sun, unmoving, waiting for a response.

Several moments pass before the old kerran's yellow eyes narrow while her withered whiskers twitch. "Why have you come?"

The man replies without hesitation. "I wish to learn."

"I see." The old kerran tilts her head to one side. "And what is it you wish to learn?"

The man pauses this time, dropping his gaze to his dust-covered sandals, studying his toes while considering the question. A smile crosses his face and he looks up. "Whatever you are willing to teach."

Desert of Ro, winter

~Two days after the sacking of Ojin~

The right side of Koan's face pressed against gritty sand, leaving his left cheek and side of his neck upturned, exposed to the sun's relentless rays. He did not recall stopping to rest, yet here he was, on his stomach, right arm outstretched over his head, left splayed out to his side.

As he lay there, breathing in air that felt as if it had come straight from a smith's forge, he tried ordering his muddled thoughts. He listened to the soft rustle of sand stirred by a rare desert breeze, confused because he could not actually feel the wind on his face and neck. Focusing solely on the rustling sound, he noticed a pattern within the muted swishing. He tried opening his eyes, but immediately shut them as the day's brilliance stabbed his senses.

Exhaustion demanded that he sleep. The chance to escape his misery seconded the order. Yet the skittering sound in the sand, growing louder by the moment, made him reopen his eyes. He only cracked his lids at first, waiting for his vision

to adjust to the brightness. Once acclimated, he opened them further and found a cloudless azure sky watching over the color-streaked dunes. The Desert of Ro, a myriad of deep reds and oranges layered with dark grays and black, stretched as far as he could see. Rippling heat waves radiated from the ground, rendering the horizon a glittering, indistinct nothingness.

Summoning a bit of strength from a reserve he did not know he possessed, he lifted his head and turned it toward the rustling sound, dragging his chin through the rust-colored sand.

A mere five paces from his right hand, a scorpion the size of his torso crouched, its shiny black carapace glistening in the sunlight. A barbed tail rose high over its back, undulating back and forth like waves on the ocean. A trail of tiny tracks led from the creature back over the dune's crest. If a scorpion could be surprised, this one seemed to be. Perhaps it had thought Koan dead. One strike from the creature, and he certainly would be.

A swift panic surged through Koan, clearing his mind and sending his heart racing. He lay there, staring down the creature, anxiously watching its pincers open and close.

He resisted the instinct to pull back his right arm, knowing the scorpion could strike faster than he could withdraw his hand. Instead, he slowly dug his left hand into the dune, the gritty grains worming their way under his fingernails. After gathering a handful of sand, he steadied himself, praying that his weakened body would respond as swiftly as he needed it to.

Koan took a slow breath and threw his left hand forward, whipping the sand at the scorpion while yanking his right hand back at the same time. Sand grains bounced off the creature's mandibles and black-orbed eyes as it skittered forward. The poisoned barb shot down like an arrow loosed from a bow to thump in the dune where Koan's hand had been a moment before. He shoved himself up on his knees as the scorpion advanced, its tail re-cocked and ready for a second strike.

Koan scrambled back, flinging one useless handful of sand

after another at the scorpion. When his left hand brushed against something smooth and firm, he glanced down to find one of the empty waterskins. Grabbing it, he held it in front of him with both hands as the scorpion stabbed again. The poisoned tail thwacked the leather.

Ripping the waterskin from Koan's hands, the scorpion jerked its tail back and forth, struggling to shake loose the waterskin. While retreating, Koan's boot heel struck something jutting up from the sand. Letting out a short cry of surprise, he fell, landing hard on his rear.

Wild-eyed, he scrambled away, kicking up sand, scared he might have tripped over a second scorpion. Realizing it was Qora on the ground beside him, he stopped. She was sprawled on her stomach in the sand, face toward him, her eyes closed.

Guilt joined with panic as he realized this was the first thought he had given his sister. An instant later, the shame melted away into worry. Qora's toasted-almond skin was red, burnt by two full days in the sun. Her normally luxurious black hair looked dull and brittle, caked with desert dust.

Remembering the danger, Koan shot a quick glance at the scorpion to find it scuttling away, its tail still thrashing about in a futile attempt to shake the waterskin loose. Exhaling, Koan crawled over to his sister on his hands and knees. He opened his mouth to call out her name, but his throat, as dry as the endless desert surrounding him, did not respond.

Koan slipped a hand under her shoulder and grunted as he rolled her over, her limbs splaying limply beside her. He placed a hand on her chest, searching for a heartbeat while his own thudded. He managed to coax a painful whisper from his parched throat. "Please, Qora. Please..."

Thump.

His sand-encrusted eyes widened a fraction. Praying he had not imagined it, he tried to hold his relief at bay while waiting for another.

Moments passed and then...*thump.*

The corners of his lips curled up.

Thump.

From Ash Comes Fire

Air rushed from Koan as he collapsed to the sand beside her and shut his eyes.

The relentless sun beat down on him as he laid there, his pulse slowly returning to normal. Soon, the incredible relief he felt began to ebb, leaving only hopelessness paired with exhaustion. Two days in the desert and all their waterskins were dry. They had been heading northwest, hoping to stumble upon the grand oasis of Erollisi's Rest or a traveling caravan. Yet all they had found was endless sand.

Cracking open his eyes, he dug deep within himself, summoning the strength to roll over. He needed to wake Qora and get her on her feet. They must keep moving. If they did not find water by sundown, there would be no sunrise.

Propping himself up on his left elbow, he looked over to his sister and froze. A dozen paces beyond Qora, standing in a patch of black sand amidst the rusty red, stood an old, sandy-furred kerran draped in simple tan robes. White patches of hair stretched back from her mouth, marking her age.

Koan blinked, then blinked again, fully expecting the kerran to be gone each time he did so. Yet the figure remained, peering at him through sharp yellow eyes, her gaze both contemplative and curious. He tried clearing his throat in order to speak, but the attempt set him coughing.

"Drink some water," purred the kerran. "It will help."

Koan glared at the stranger and, unable to speak, reached for the discarded skin beside Qora, intending to show the kerran just how empty it was. Wrapping his fingers around the skin's corked mouth, he went to lift it and stopped short. Surprise and confusion filled him. The waterskin felt heavy.

Sand fell from his brow as he drew his eyebrows together, tugged on the skin, and heard the sweet, joyous sound of water sloshing within. He stared, wide-eyed, at the kerran. A faint smile rested on her face, just enough to show the whites of her teeth behind her black lips.

Lifting a bony, gnarled hand, she gestured at him. "Go on. Drink."

Buoyed by a surge of energy, Koan sat up, ripped the cork

stopper free, and brought the waterskin to his mouth. Tilting his head back, he lifted the leather casing up and rejoiced as water poured into his mouth, soaking his tongue and throat. It was not until his second gulp that he realized the water was ice cold.

After his third mouthful, he forced himself to stop and scooted to Qora. Propping her head in his lap, he placed a thumb on her chin and parted her cracked, flaking lips. Holding the skin above his sister, he sent a slow dribble of water into her mouth, watching her throat to ensure she swallowed. Throughout, the old kerran simply stood in her patch of black sand and watched.

Once his sister had managed three swallows, Koan lowered the waterskin and whispered, "Qora?" Reaching up, he brushed away the grains of red sand stuck to her face. "Qora?" When she remained unresponsive, Koan looked back to the old kerran.

Her presence made no sense. She appeared rested and comfortable, as if she were standing in an awning's shade on a cool morning. The kerrans Koan had known in Ojin preferred to avoid the heat of the day.

A quick look around revealed no camel or horse nearby, unless the beast was hidden away in a valley between dunes, yet he doubted she had traveled here on foot. Nevertheless, he dropped his gaze to look for tracks and froze. The sand surrounding her was smooth and undisturbed. There were no footprints. None.

His gaze shot back to her face. "Who are you?"

She did not respond. Instead, she continued studying Koan, peering into him as much as at him. Koan was about to repeat his question when the kerran shifted her gaze to Qora. "Your sister. Is she as determined as you appear to be?"

Koan's unease grew. "What makes you think she's my sister?"

"The resemblance is clear." Her catlike eyes narrowed, her whiskers twitched. "Now, answer my question." The manner in which she delivered the words indicated that she not only expected obedience, but typically received it.

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Koan paused a moment, then shook his head. "No. She is even more so."

The kerran's black lips curled into a slight smile. "Good."

A quick gust of wind from the west blew past Koan, its arrival both welcome and unexpected. As grains of sand rolled along the dune's surface, Koan twisted around and stared westward, curious. Expecting the respite from the still desert air to be brief, Koan was surprised when the gust grew more intense. The air around him and Qora began to swirl, strong enough to lift the sand from the dune and spin it around them in a twister of red.

Koan lifted a hand to shield his eyes as the sudden sandstorm engulfed him and his sister, the wind howling about them. It felt as if thousands of tiny needles were stabbing at his sunburnt skin, his face, ears, and hands crying out as the grains whipped past, lashing at him. He threw his body over Qora, protecting her face while clamping his hands over his eyes. The world spun, and Koan thought he might lose his fragile grip on consciousness.

Then, as quick as it started, the sandstorm stopped. The wind did not slow. It did not ebb. It simply stopped.

Still lying over Qora, Koan cracked open a single eye and found a mottled mix of orange sand and gray rock around him. Sitting up, he stared at their surroundings, completely baffled. The rust-colored sand was gone.

He turned to the old kerran but found only empty air. Had that not been enough to strike Koan dumb, the massive mountain beneath them certainly would have been.

Tilting his head back, he gazed up the slope toward the summit. At the top sat a series of buildings resting on a black rock peak. Most of the wooden structures were small and simple one-story affairs topped with flat roofs. One however, was much larger, standing three times as high as the others. Wide, open-air gaps lined the side he could see, covered by long, white curtains rippling in a wind not felt in the low desert.

Koan looked around, his gaze traversing the sand. He

would have liked to thank the kerran, whoever—whatever—she was. Letting out a heavy sigh, he realized he was smiling. Hefting Qora into his arms, he rose to his feet and began stumbling toward the peak, a spark of hope flickering in his chest.



Flame



The elf to the old kerran's left takes another sip of water, then leans over and sets the clay jug on the wooden porch. He rests his elbows on his knees, interlocking his fingers. "Why do you wish to learn?"

The man reaches up to wipe his brow. "I am from Sagara."

The dal nods. "So you lost people in the raids?"

The man pauses before answering in a soft, sorrowful whisper. "My wife and..." He swallows and stands a little straighter. "My wife and three daughters."

"And that made you angry?"

"It did," concedes the man.

Wood creaks as the elf sits back in his chair, a flicker of disappointment dancing in his eyes. "Anger is a disease. A fetid sickness that—once taken hold—rots the spirit from its core." He shakes his head. "I will not teach an angry man."

"It is a good thing I am no longer angry, then."

The elf tilts his head. "The emotion in your voice is clear. If you are not angry, then what are you?"

The man takes a deep breath, lifts his chin high, and proclaims, "I am determined."

Sagara, early spring
~Six years after the sacking of Ojin~

"Qora! Over here!"

Turning her head, Qora's gaze danced over the crowd filling the street. Koan stood across the way, in the shade cast by one of the bazaar's crimson awnings, waving his arms over his head. She frowned, sighing. "Seraphs forbid you make this easy for me..."

With two stacked bowls of seafood stew carefully balanced in one hand and a pair of earthen mugs filled with palmfruit juice clasped in the other, she stepped into the throng of people. While Master Sadeen had warned them Sagara would be crowded today, Qora had not expected this. The celebration here made even the most raucous festival in Ojin look like a sleepy prayer gathering.

Those who noticed Qora coming graciously stepped aside. Most, however, were too distracted, laughing and talking as they walked, forcing her to dodge and dart around them.

After making it across the street, she climbed a set of sandstone stairs, leaving the crowd and hot sun behind for the blessed shade of the bazaar's awnings. The dojo atop Ash Peak did not see temperatures like this until late spring.

She stopped beside one of the building's stone pillars and spotted Koan forty paces down the bazaar's crowded platform, perched on its edge and facing away from her. She glared at the back of his head through narrowed eyes and mumbled, "That's quite all right, Koan. I'm fine, thank you."

She murmured quiet apologies as she slipped through the crowd, trying hard not to spill juice or stew on anyone. As she drew even with Koan, she unleashed another withering glare. "I could have used some help, you know."

Koan's attention remained fixed on the brawling square below. "And then we would have lost this spot. Shade," he pointed up, then gestured to the gathering below, "*and* a view."

This vantage was better than standing in the packed crowd. From here, they could actually see the entire square instead of just the fighters' heads. She nudged Koan with her right elbow. "Here. Take yours."

Barely glancing over, Koan grabbed the top bowl of seafood stew and one of the palmfruit mugs, which he immediately lifted to his lips. After a large swallow, he lowered the cup, a content smile on his face, and refocused his full attention on the brawling match.

Qora's eyes narrowed. "You're *welcome*."

“My apologies.” Leaning over, Koan kissed her forehead and pulled back, leaving a bit of palmfruit juice behind. “Thank you, Qora. I do appreciate it.”

She smiled up at him. “That’s better.” As her hands were still full, she brushed her brow against his shoulder to wipe away the juice and left a faint purple stain behind.

Koan noticed the splotch and frowned. “I hope Master Sadeen does not see that.”

“He will, of course,” said Qora, her smile growing. “He always does.”

Koan eyed the stain for a moment longer, lips pressed together, then said, “Well, he’s not here now, so...” He shrugged his shoulders, grinned, and returned his attention to the brawling square.

With a quiet chuckle, Qora joined him, watching the spectacle and sipping her juice as she waited for her stew to cool.

A square stretch of rust-orange sand was visible amidst the crowd below, each side marked out at forty-four paces. Five men were within the boundaries, two teams of two along with the sparring judge. A wooden post, each as tall as a man, stood in the four corners. Atop each hung yellow and red ribbons, limper than day-old dead snakes in the still afternoon air. Unbroken lines of black sand ran from post to post that, if disturbed by one team, handed victory to the other and ended the match.

A pair of large, swarthy men, their bare chests coated with a thin sheen of sweat was beating on their opponents like butchers tenderizing a tough goat flank. Their blows were wild and free, leaving them open to simple counterattacks had either of the two smaller men been able to strike back. However, as unrefined as the larger men’s attacks were, they were viciously strong. Qora winced as one particularly brutal series of meaty-fisted blows sent the smaller men staggering.

When Qora was still living with her father and brothers in Ojin, she had always been reluctant to attend such events. She found them tedious and barbaric. Today, however, she had come intrigued, curious to see techniques other than what the

monks of the order were teaching her. It did not take long for a disappointed frown to creep over her face. "They're nothing more than brutes."

An amused chuckle slipped from Koan. "You were expecting more?"

She sipped at her juice. "I had hoped."

Her frown grew into a disapproving scowl as the match progressed. The brutes were toying with the other men, knocking them to the ground, picking them back up, and then punching them again. The crowd's raucous cheers changed to angry boos. Qora glared at the sparring judge, wondering why he did not end the brawl.

She turned to Koan, surprised to see he wore a scowl that matched her own. He, Arri, and their father had always enjoyed the exhibitions in Ojin.

"You aren't fond of the spectacle?"

Koan pressed his lips together, shaking his head. "This isn't sport. It's thuggery."

"So we can go watch the juggler then? If we hurry, we might be able to—" She cut off, having looked back to the square just as one of the brutes unleashed a savage kick to the side of his opponent's knee. The man's leg buckled, bending at an angle no leg should. Letting out a scream that made Qora's skin crawl, he collapsed to the sand.

The sweaty attacker stood over the fallen man, a wicked sneer on his face. The crowd's jeers surged, overcoming those sick souls who were still screaming their approval.

Qora clenched her teeth. "You saw that, yes?"

Koan's response was swift, his tone sharp, his words clipped. "I most certainly did."

As the injured man struggled to crawl across the border of the ring, the sparring judge finally rang his small bronze gong to end the fight. The crowd's rancor nearly drowned out the clanging. Several men from the crowd dashed into the square to help the bloody losers while the victors paraded around, throwing their arms into the air and bellowing at the crowd.

Qora's hands squeezed her mug and bowl as the sparring

judge pleaded with the crowd to quiet down. It took a while, but eventually those gathered lowered their voices so he could be heard. "Are there any challengers? Any challengers at all?"

His question managed to quiet the crowd more than his begging had. Those who were angry fell silent, crossing their arms over their chests.

The sparring judge pivoted in the square's sandy center, his gaze traversing the crowd. "Should no challengers step forward, the Subin brothers win the prize!"

Qora leaned over to Koan. "What's the prize?"

Koan shrugged his shoulders and grumbled, "Whatever it is, they don't deserve it."

The two brothers clapped one another on their backs, clearly enjoying their impending good fortune. The sparring judge called out twice more for challengers, sending heads in the crowd turning side-to-side, searching for someone to step forward.

When it seemed apparent no one would, a short sigh slipped from Qora. "We should challenge them."

Koan chuckled as if she were jesting. The moment he met her gaze, the smile vanished. "You're serious."

"I am."

Her quick and decisive response sent Koan shaking his head. "No. We can't."

"Of course we can." She nodded to the square. "They're apes. They have no skill, no—"

"That's not what I meant, Qora," sighed Koan, interrupting her. "We can't challenge them because..." Trailing off, he pointed down the street where Ash Peak sat on the far western horizon, black and majestic.

Qora's scowl deepened as she eyed the distant mountain. "We are to bring light to a dark and unjust world." She turned back to Koan. "How many times has Sensei Sadeen told us that?"

"Plenty," retorted Koan. "But he also told us—*this very morning*—to conduct ourselves in a manner that brings honor to the order. Entering a brawling contest does not do that."

She stabbed a finger toward the grinning brothers. "But ignoring brutality does?" She bent down and set her half-empty mug and stew bowl on the sandstone, then stood tall. "I am challenging. And there's nothing you can say that will stop me."

For several moments, Koan simply stared at her, his frown blooming into an outright scowl. All the while, the sparring judge pleaded for someone to come forward. Finally, Koan shook his head and sighed, his gaze shifting to the pale yellow sash draping from Qora's left shoulder to right hip. "At least take that off."

Qora slipped a finger under the sash's soft silk and lifted it over her head, carefully folding it and placing it in her hip satchel. After setting down his food and drink, Koan followed her lead, removing his yellow sash. A faint smile spread over Qora's face. "You're coming with me?"

Koan did not respond right away. Instead, he folded his sash, stuffed it into his satchel, and then met her gaze. "We should have gone to see the juggler."

Qora's slight smile grew wider as she grabbed Koan's wrist, raised both their arms, and shouted, "We challenge!" The cry immediately drew the attention of the crowd, the sparring judge, and the Subin brothers.

After releasing her grip on Koan's arm, she hopped down from the sandstone perch, dropping six feet straight down to land in the sand with a soft thump. Koan followed, alighting beside her. The crowd parted as the Gamysh twins strode side-by-side beneath the hot sun, toward the brawling square. The villagers they passed eyed the pair with expressions ranging from curiosity to amusement to sympathy.

The siblings stepped over the black sand line and approached the sparring judge. The Subin brothers hovered behind him, their eyes brimming with wicked anticipation. This close, she could now see the brothers in detail. With identical bushy black eyebrows, protruding jaws, and noses crooked like a vulture's beak, she wondered if they were twins as well. The lone difference was a jagged scar running from chin to left ear on the brother to her right.

When she and Koan were a dozen paces away, the judge held up a hand, gong baton clenched within. Once they stopped, he regarded them for a moment, their simple tan robes and sandaled feet. With eyebrows raised, he asked, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Qora understood his doubt. The sweaty Subin brothers stood at least a head taller than the Gamysh twins. Nevertheless, she was determined to see this through. "We are."

With a shrug of his shoulders, the judge said, "As you wish. The rules are simple. No weapons allowed. Use one, you lose. Both of you must stay in the square. Leave it, you lose. Understand?" When Qora and Koan nodded their agreement, he pointed to one of the square's sides. "You two over there." He glanced back to the Subin brothers. "You two, back to your side. I'll check the lines, then we'll begin."

After giving the hulking brothers one last look, Qora turned and strode to their side, ignoring the line of spectators staring at her. She undid the ties holding her satchel to her belt, tossed the leather sack to the rust-colored sand, and then dropped to a knee to loosen her sandal straps.

Koan knelt beside her, doing the same. "Remember. Move swiftly. Move with purpose."

"I know, Koan."

"Maintain balance and space."

"I *know*, Koan." She slipped one sandal off and started on the other.

"Quick strikes. Do not waste—"

"*Koan*," interrupted Qora, peering over at her brother. "I've been in every session, every lecture that you have. I know what to do."

The skin around Koan's eyes tightened. "Prove it, then." With that, he rose to his bare feet, tossed his sandals atop their satchels, and faced the center of the square.

With his quiet challenge fanning the flame already burning in her gut, she tugged her other sandal loose and added it to their pile of belongings. She rose and faced the square,

digging her toes into the hot sand. The sparring judge passed, inspecting them as much as he was the black sand line. The crowd grew loud again as bets were placed on the outcome. After completing his inspection, the judge headed for the square's center.

Qora closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath of hot seaside air, holding it for one...two...three heartbeats. She exhaled slowly, pushing every distraction and emotion out with the breath. Her mind clear and unimpeded, she reopened her eyes.

Koan spoke, his voice serene as the desert night. "I'll take the one with the scar."

Qora nodded, responding in a similarly even tone. "Fine." She focused all of her attention on the unscarred brother. His posture was lazy and casual, slouched to the right, one leg bearing most of his weight. He twisted his neck, stretching it while rotating his left arm. His right remained loose and free at his side.

When the judge struck the gong, the Subin brothers advanced at once. Their pace was steady and unhurried, oozing confidence and malice along with a copious amount of sweat.

Qora stood motionless, continuing to study No-Scar. Watching his gait, his eyes, the way he kept stretching the left side of his neck and shoulder. A fraction of a smile crept over her face. Taking three steps to her left, she set her feet shoulder-width apart, her right foot several inches ahead of her left. Koan also stepped forward and lowered himself into a half-crouch, his right arm extended before him, his left tucked close to his side.

No-Scar lumbered forward, the sneer on his face widening with each step. Qora wondered if he might say something, but all that came out was a series of low, throaty grunts. She remained statue-still as he approached, relaxed and calm with each breath slow and measured.

A flicker of concern danced through No-Scar's eyes as he drew near, a moment of doubt to which a wise man would

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have listened. Wisdom, however, seemed to be a trait No-Scar lacked. At ten paces, he rushed ahead, cocking his right arm back.

She waited until he started to bring his arm forward, not entirely sure if he would loose a crossing blow or a straight punch. The moment it was clear he was throwing a cross, Qora leaned back, twisting to her right. His balled fist whooshed past her face, sailing through empty air and throwing him off balance.

Qora dropped to her knee, her left arm already drawn back and unleashed a ferocious, pointed strike at No-Scar's exposed gut. Her knuckles sunk into fat then muscle, driving deep into his stomach. Air exploded from the man's mouth.

With her knee anchored in the sand, she extended her other leg behind her. Sweeping it around, she pivoted away from the teetering brute. She stood as she spun and was on her feet in time to see a gasping, crouched-over No-Scar throw a second fruitless punch to where she no longer was. His fist slammed into the ground, sending up a puff of red sand.

Darting behind No-Scar's back, she drove the point of her right elbow into where his neck met shoulder. If the man had been capable of drawing breath, she was sure he would have screamed. Instead, he dropped to his knees and fell forward without a sound. He tried propping himself up with his arms, but his left one gave out.

As he toppled over onto his side, Qora hopped back, ready to drive a heel into his kidney should he try to get up. He simply lay there, wheezing like a diseased goat.

Koan stood over the other brother. The man was sprawled on his back, apparently unconscious. Rust-colored sand stuck to his sweaty chest and blood poured from his nose. Koan caught her stare and offered a quick nod.

Qora returned her attention to No-Scar. He had yet to move.

She was struck by the silence of the crowd. While she heard the chatter of people walking the streets along with the distant notes of a troubadour's lute, those gathered around

the brawling square stood quiet. More than a few mouths hung agape.

Spotting the judge standing by one of the corner poles, Qora lifted her eyebrows. "Is that the match?" She pointed at No-Scar, who had progressed from wheezing to moaning. "Or shall I knock him out, too?"

The sparring judge blinked twice, glancing between Qora, Koan, and the Subin brothers. He raised the gong and baton, three quick strikes of wood on bronze sent clear notes ringing through the air. The crowd erupted, their cheers washing over Qora in waves.

The judge kicked up sand as he scurried forward, stopping just short of Qora. "How did you do that?"

Qora held the man's intense stare, unwilling to tell him the truth yet unsure what answer he might accept as plausible.

"We got lucky," said Koan, stepping up beside her.

With a quick nod, Qora added, "Exactly. Just a little bit of luck."

The judge's eyes narrowed as he stared between them. "Of course..." His gaze fell to their robes. A moment later, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care how you did it, just that you did." He nodded to the fallen brothers. "Nobody likes those two." He winked at the Gamysh twins. "Not even their own mother. Now, if you don't mind..." He stepped back and began banging on the gong again, shouting for quiet.

Concerned, Qora leaned close to Koan. "What's he doing?"

"What do you think?" asked Koan. "He's going to call for challengers."

Qora's eyes widened. She had not considered that. Hurrying forward, she tapped the judge on his shoulder. "Excuse me, but we don't want to fight again."

The judge twisted around and stared at her. "But you're the winners. This is how it's done."

"We don't want to fight. We're finished here. Cool days and warm nights to you." She started to walk to where they had left their belongings, but stopped after a couple steps when the judge dashed in front of her.

“What about the prize?”

“Give it to someone else. We don’t want it.” She tried to step around the man but he slid in front of her again.

“Wait a moment and let me call for challengers. No one is going to step forward.” He pointed at the Subin brothers. “Not after that. Then you can go. *With* the prize.”

Qora paused, curious. “What is it?”

The man’s eyes lit up. “One hundred gold pieces.”

Qora’s eyebrows arched. The sum was significant. Nodding once, she said, “Fine. Call for your challengers.”

A wide grin split the judge’s face. Stepping back, he resumed banging on the gong and begging for quiet.

Koan took his place before Qora, his brow furrowed. “What are you doing? We’re not permitted—”

“Oh, hush. We’re not keeping it. We’ll donate it to the order as a thank-you for taking us in.”

“And where will we say we got a hundred gold?”

Qora paused. It was an excellent question.

“We don’t. We donate it anonymously. Leave it on the grandmaster’s step.”

Koan was quiet for several moments, his frown at last fading. “Very well.” He scanned the crowd. “You’d better hope no challenger steps—” He stopped, his eyes going wide at something behind Qora.

Twisting around, she froze. “Oh. Oh, no.”

A man several inches shorter than Qora stood on the other side of the black sand, his piercing green eyes fixed on her and Koan. His skin, the color of tea swimming with cream, was much lighter than most humans in the crowd. Flecks of gray dusted his shaggy, sandy brown hair. While his simple robe was identical to those worn by Qora and Koan, the sash draped across his chest was different from those stuffed in their satchels. His was black.

Qora’s stomach dropped just as someone grabbed her arm and lifted it into the air.

“As there seem to be no challengers,” called the sparring judge, “I declare—”

“Stop!” shouted the man with the black sash.

Everyone joined Qora and Koan in staring at the man. He strode into the square as graceful as a sand cat. The crowd quieted as he approached the center and was silent by the time he stopped several paces away from the judge and the twins.

“Cool days, initiates.” His voice was soft even as his tone was firm.

Qora ripped her arm from the judge, squared herself, and bowed low. “Cool days, Grandmaster Tam.” Koan mirrored her bow and extended the same reverent greeting. Upon rising, she was surprised to see a slight smile on the grandmaster’s face.

“Are the two of you enjoying the festival?”

Qora needed a moment to find her tongue. “Yes, Grandmaster.”

Yasuli shifted his gaze to Koan. “And you?”

“Yes, Grandmaster. I am.” The pained expression on his face belied his answer.

“Good,” said the monk, his smile widening a fraction. “Very good.” Leaning to the side, he peered around Koan to where the unconscious Subin brother still lay. “The two of you were quite impressive.”

Qora gave a polite nod, but inside she wilted like a flower in summer.

Standing straight, the grandmaster studied them for several moments before speaking. “I was under the impression your sensei provided certain instructions for the initiates regarding expected conduct.”

After swallowing the lump that had magically appeared in her throat, Qora responded, “He did.”

Grandmaster Tam nodded slowly. “I see. And yet...” He gestured to the crumpled forms of the Subin brothers.

Several quiet moments passed with him staring at the twins, as though waiting for them to plead their case. Qora wanted to explain why they had intervened, why they had gone against their sensei, yet she chose to keep still. Arguing

with the grandmaster would only make things worse. Koan remained silent as well.

Eventually, the grandmaster looked down to No-Scar. "Retrieve your brother and leave the square."

No-Scar, who had managed to sit up, climbed to his feet. He stumbled to where his brother lay, grabbed the unconscious brute's legs, and dragged him from the brawling square. Qora watched the ordeal as it offered an escape from the grandmaster's stare. Once the Subin brothers were beyond the black sand, she had no choice but to look back.

After several moments of eyeing the siblings, Grandmaster Tam turned his head and addressed the sparring judge. "I would like to challenge them."

The quiet proclamation triggered an excited murmur in the crowd. The judge blinked several times as if uncertain what to do. Qora felt like her heart had leapt into her throat.

Recovering from his surprise before Qora did, the judge turned to the crowd. "And who might your partner be?"

"No partner," replied the grandmaster. His green eyes dug into Qora, then her brother and back again. "I will face them alone." He walked to one side of the square. "You may begin whenever you are ready."

With each step, the crowd's murmur grew along with Qora's embarrassment. Looking over at Koan, she muttered, "This is a jest, isn't it?" The grandmaster's martial demonstrations in the dojo were works of art. Vicious, terrible works of art.

Koan looked like he had taken a bite of a rotten egg. Before he could respond, the sparring judge stepped in front of them.

"To your side, please." The man sounded almost gleeful. "And wait for the gong." With that, he hurried away, heading straight for where No-Scar had disturbed the line of black sand by dragging his brother through it.

Qora paid him no attention, her gaze shifting between the grandmaster's back and her brother's pallid face. "He'll give us a sparring lesson, yes? He doesn't expect us to actually fight."

Koan held her stare for a moment. Letting out a heavy sigh, he turned and walked back to their side of the square without answering. All Qora could do was follow. Upon reaching the black sand line, she stood there in a daze.

She started when the judge struck the gong and scurried out of the way. Grandmaster Tam stepped forward at once, barefoot in the sand. In contrast, she and Koan remained fixed in place like the wooden poles in the ring corners.

Upon reaching the center, the grandmaster stopped. He raised a hand and waved it, beckoning them forward. The twins exchanged a worried look and then approached. As they neared, the grandmaster put his arms behind his back, striking a pose more suited for giving a lecture than fighting. He seemed oblivious to the roaring crowd around them. Qora was not comforted, however. The man moved faster than lightning struck.

“What do we do?” hissed Koan.

Qora shook her head. “I...don’t know.” Actually trying to fight the grandmaster never entered her mind. She had less chance of hitting the grandmaster than she did of surviving a month in the Desert of Ro without water.

The twins slowed their approach as they drew near. Qora anticipated some sort of springing attack. The monk stood motionless and silent. When Qora and her brother were half-a-dozen paces away, he uttered a single command.

“Stop.”

The twins halted. The crowd’s roar rose to the loudest it had been yet.

The grandmaster stepped forward, stopping when he was close enough to reach out and touch Qora. “This is quite a difficult situation for you.”

Qora and Koan responded in unison. “Yes, Grandmaster.”

“A situation you put yourselves in.”

Again, the twins replied as one. “Yes, Grandmaster.”

“You were told to conduct yourselves in a manner that brings honor to the Ashen Order, were you not?”

“Yes, Grandmaster.”

“And yet—” he paused, indicating the screaming crowd “—here we are.” His gaze snapped back to the twins and he tilted his head to the side, a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes. “And neither of you have any idea why, do you?”

Furrows of pure confusion appeared in Qora’s forehead, as deep as they were long. She had been rather certain of the “why.” Or at least she thought she had been.

“I am not upset that you intervened in the match,” said the grandmaster. “To speak true, I was ready to announce my own challenge when I saw the two of you in the bazaar.”

Qora’s confusion deepened. “I don’t understand...”

“I can see that,” said Grandmaster Tam with a short nod. “When I spotted you, I waited. I wanted to see what you would do. I was quite pleased when you stepped forward. It was the right decision.”

Qora was beyond bewildered. “If it was the right decision...why are we here?” She glanced at the square and the surrounding crowd.

Grandmaster Tam lifted his gaze to the clear blue sky, let out a short sigh, and then looked back to the twins. “Because you placed an individual—me—over that which is supreme: justice and honor. You should have defended your decision without apology, without hesitation.” He stepped even closer, his eyes flashing with sudden intensity. “We of the order do what is right, *because* it is right. It does not matter who we offend, what rule or law or *sensei’s instruction* we might break in the process. Do you understand?”

Qora dropped her chin to her chest. This was worse than if the grandmaster had tossed her and Koan about the brawler’s square. As she stood there, wishing she were anywhere else, she noticed the crowd had quieted considerably, no doubt wondering why the combatants were merely chatting.

“Look at me,” ordered the grandmaster. “Both of you.”

Qora shot a quick glance at Koan. He looked how she felt, embarrassed and ashamed. Focusing on Grandmaster Tam, she was surprised to find the intense glare gone. Instead, a gentle kindness filled his eyes.

"You made a mistake." He nodded at the almost silent crowd. "A rather memorable one, at that. One you will never make again, yes?"

In mumbled unison, the twins responded. "Yes, Grandmaster."

"Excellent." He continued studying them for several moments then gave a single, decisive nod. "Tomorrow, you will both receive green sashes. You are initiates no longer. Enjoy the remainder of your afternoon, Brother and Sister Gamysh." With that, he spun on his heel and walked away.

A stunned, baffled, and elated Qora stared after him as he reached the black sand line. Without looking back, the grandmaster dragged a toe through the line, and then moved into the crowd. Quiet spectators wearing expressions of bewilderment parted to let him pass.

Qora tried to catch a glimpse of the grandmaster, but he was gone. She shook her head. While this was the moment that she and Koan had been striving for over six years, never had she expected it to happen like this. As her shock faded, joy bubbled to the surface.

"I told you this would be better than seeing some juggler," Koan said with a wink.

A wide smile spread across her face. "Come along, Brother Gamysh. It's your turn to buy the seafood stew."



Blaze



The next dal crosses his arms. "Say we teach you." His tone is soft and unassuming. "What would you do with the knowledge we would impart?"

The man shifts his weight, the black volcanic sand crunching under his feet. He pauses for a heartbeat before answering. "I would teach it to others."

The elf nods slowly. "That is a worthy answer."

The man offers a respectful bow. "You honor me."

"Worthy, but also incomplete."

The man stands tall, his brow knitted in confusion. "I do not understand."

Ash Peak, summer

~Twelve years after the sacking of Ojin~

Koan took a deep, silent breath and slipped his hands behind his back. Grabbing one wrist with his other hand, he squeezed out his frustration in a manner the five initiates kneeling on the mat before him could not see. Five white sashes stared up with expressions blank as a fresh sheet of parchment.

He eyed their faces, trying to temper his exasperation by reminding himself how he had felt when in their position. The constant self-doubt. The ever-present certainty that everything he said or did was wrong.

Letting out a quiet sigh, he loosened his grip on his wrist just as a gust of wind drifted into the dojo, rippling through the long white curtains along the building's western side. He looked over, curious. While breezes were more common atop Ash Peak than in the low desert, their presence still earned notice.

His surprise grew when he spotted a pair of figures nestled in the dojo's southwest corner. While Grandmaster Tam was a somewhat familiar face in Koan's lectures, stopping by every few weeks to observe, Qora was not. In fact, Koan could not recall the last time she had visited one. She typically spent the mornings meditating.

"The truth."

Koan's attention snapped back to the initiates, amazed that one of them had provided the correct answer to his proffered question. As the two initiates on either end were staring at the young woman in the middle, Koan fixed his gaze on her. Her skin was dark, darker even than Koan's. A white band restrained her frizzy black hair. Her eyes, a rich, deep mahogany that matched the dojo's wood floor and pillars, belied her nervousness.

"Explain."

"That which has the power to both build and destroy, to earn and murder trust, to create dynasties and topple empires." She paused for a moment, then continued in a tone more hesitant than Koan liked. "The truth?"

Despite the stoic demeanor he maintained for the sake of the initiates, Koan was pleased. He had expected the lecture to end with his question unanswered. "Well done."

Elation flashed over the young woman's face, an emotion she immediately—and correctly—chased away. "Thank you, Sensei."

Koan nodded once then walked back to the dais' center, his steps lightly scraping the padded cloth beneath his bare feet. After lowering himself into a sitting position, he closed his eyes. "Breathing exercises."

While counting his heartbeats, Koan led the initiates, slowly drawing in a lungful of air through his nose, holding the breath for a moment, and then exhaling through parted lips. After his one hundredth heartbeat, he opened his eyes. "You are released."

One by one, the initiates rose. Moving to stand before Koan, each offered a short bow before heading to the eastern

curtains. Koan remained seated until the fifth and final initiate slipped past the cloth, exiting the dojo. Then he relaxed, his shoulders slumping, and looked to Qora and the grandmaster. The pair was already halfway across the expansive room. He rose, stepped off the teaching dais, and waited. His curiosity grew with each stride they took toward him.

As Grandmaster Tam drew near, he nodded to the curtains through which the initiates had left. "How are they progressing?"

Koan considered his answer before replying. "They are like newly sprouted seeds, Grandmaster. Full of potential, but fragile."

"It is good, then, that we are here to tend to their growth."

"Yes, Grandmaster," agreed Koan as the two stopped before him. "It is." He shifted his gaze to his sister. "No meditation this morning?"

"Actually, I had just sat down by Adelia's Spring when the grandmaster arrived and asked me to accompany him."

Koan flinched, as he did whenever someone mentioned the spring. It reminded him of the secret he had been holding—even from Qora—for twelve years. He hoped neither noticed the twitch.

Qora certainly did not, as her gaze was fixed on the grandmaster. "He said he needed to speak with us."

Koan met the grandmaster's stare. "Of course. What is it?"

Grandmaster Tam turned and began strolling toward the eastern wall, his hands clasped behind his back. "Walk with me, please."

The Gamysh twins followed Grandmaster Tam, remaining a single, respectful step behind the elder monk. Silence ruled the short journey through the gauzy white curtains. Koan paused briefly to slip on his sandals before stepping down the stairs and into the hot sun.

While black sand and rock covered most of Ash Peak, the various paths meandering through the Ashen Order's complex were comprised of dusty orange or dark red sand brought up from the desert below. Every winter, initiates hiked down the

mountainside, a porting stick and two baskets draped over his or her shoulders, and into the colorful expanse known as the Shimmering Sands. There, they gathered new sand to replace that which wind or feet had scattered throughout the last year. The arduous task served a dual purpose. It kept the order's grounds pristine and it taught the initiates the importance of patience, perseverance, and dedication.

The trio followed an orange sand path, heading for the single-story dormitories where the order's members resided. Most of those either sitting outside or visible through the open-air windows wore white or yellow initiate sashes. Ordained monks, along with many of the sensei and masters, were out in the world, applying the order's teachings wherever they traveled.

The grandmaster remained silent as he led the pair past the simple wooden structures. Turning north onto a red sand path, he headed further up the slope. The twins dutifully followed, repeatedly exchanging inquisitive looks with one another, until the grandmaster finally spoke. "Tell me about Ojin."

Koan glanced at Qora again, this time in surprise. She shrugged her shoulders then faced the grandmaster.

"Is there something in particular you would like to know?"

"Actually, yes, there is. Recount for me the events of your last night there. Be as detailed as possible, please."

Koan stared at Qora and found a furrowed brow to match his own. It had been years since either of them had discussed the assault on their village with anyone else. Nevertheless, they complied with the grandmaster's request, relaying the events as best they could. Their father's death. Dashing through dark alleys. The screams of friends and neighbors. Arri's selfless sacrifice.

They told the grandmaster everything, save for one detail: the impeccably dressed man with fire dancing in his eyes.

Years ago, when they stumbled up Ash Peak for the first time, Qora suggested they never tell anyone about him. At best, people would disbelieve their claim. More likely as not, they would name the twins mad. Koan agreed at once, having

already come to the same conclusion, both about the man with the glowing eyes as well as the old kerran in the desert.

The grandmaster listened without interruption, strolling along with his gaze forward and hands clasped behind his back. He led them into the shade, beneath the massive black rock outcrop where the garden—the one part of Ash Peak that was not black, tan, red, or orange—awaited. A stream of clear water snaked through lush green plants, leafy bushes, lavender flowers, and short trees with fanned palm fronds. The air changed, too, shifting from ever-present dry, dusty, odorless desert to the light fragrance of perfumed blossoms.

The grandmaster led them to the rock face where clear, cold water poured out, feeding the stream. Stopping, he faced them and listened as Qora recounted how they ran out into the dark desert that night, leaving their village and elder brother behind.

“You know, it has always amazed me how the two of you made it here, across the desert all alone. It is quite a distance.”

Qora looked at Koan, gratitude in her eyes. “Were it not for Koan, I would not have.”

As he always did when the topic arose between them, Koan put on a humble smile and shook his head. He downplayed his heroics because in truth, he had done nothing heroic. “Qora, please...”

Grandmaster Tam studied Koan closely, his green eyes sharp and intense. “Adelia’s water is a great blessing, is it not, Sensei Gamysh?”

Koan stiffened, his smile freezing in place.

Not long after he and Qora joined the monks, Sensei Sadeen had brought them and the other white sashes here to give a lecture on the history of the order. Koan had listened, wide-eyed when the monk recounted the story of Adelia Arcose, the kerran seer of Sagara who had helped three former Teir’Dal found the Ashen Order. When she had passed, the elves had buried her here. The next day, water began pouring forth from the rock. Without Adelia’s Spring, the Ashen Order would never have thrived.

Whether the kerran in the desert had been a wandering druid or the spirit of Adelia Arcose, Koan knew that without her intervention, his and Qora's sun-bleached skeletons would be buried in some dune.

Koan wondered if Tam somehow knew the truth. "Yes, Grandmaster, it is."

The corners of Grandmaster Tam's mouth curled up a fraction. Nodding at the water streaming from the rock, he asked, "Would anyone like a drink before we continue?"

Both twins declined, with Koan's response coming a moment or two after Qora's quick "No, thank you."

"Then let us continue." Grandmaster Tam's gaze lingered on Koan a moment longer before he turned and resumed walking down the path.

Qora shot a curious look at Koan—he apparently had done a poor job hiding his reaction—and then followed the grandmaster. Koan did as well, his mind and heart racing as they emerged from the garden.

As they approached the small structure that preceded everything else atop Ash Peak, the Founders' home, the grandmaster asked a question that nearly made Koan trip over his feet. "Why aren't you telling me the whole truth, Sensei Gamysh?"

Koan looked over and found his sister staring at him with wide eyes. At first, her alarm made no sense. She did not know about Adelia. Then he realized she must be thinking about the secret they shared. The man with the glowing eyes.

Before Koan could form a cogent response, Qora cleared her throat. "What do you mean?"

"My meaning is obvious. I believe there is more to your tale than you have shared with me." He stopped directly before the Founder's house and faced them. "Am I wrong?"

Koan held the man's strident, inquisitive stare, wrestling with how to answer. Unable to think clearly, he looked past the monk to the small, simple house. Four empty chairs sat on the porch. Koan imagined the original grandmasters and Adelia sitting in them, staring down, judging him.

Koan wanted to tell the truth, to right that wrong, but he hesitated.

When neither he nor Qora responded, Grandmaster Tam let out a short sigh and stepped forward. He passed between the twins, stopping again after only a half-dozen paces. Beyond him, down the mountain, and across the expanse of colored sand and black rock rested Sagara, abutted against the Crimson Bay.

“They were like grains of sand sprinkled on a rock, white dots on a slate of blue,” announced the grandmaster. “That is how Grandmaster Daera describes the moment she first spotted Majdul’s ships sailing into the bay.” He half-turned, glancing over his shoulder. “You have both read her journal, I trust?”

The twins responded in unison. “Yes, Grandmaster.”

The elder monk nodded once, then faced the sea again. “By the time the ships landed, Grandmaster V’Marr and Grandmaster Uloro—the one they called Silent Fist—had joined her here.” He waved a hand at the black sand beneath his feet. “They watched Sagara burn, black smoke climbing into the sky and drifting overhead. After so many years of fighting under the banner of the Teir’Dal, they had taken a vow of peace. And yet, they knew they could not hide themselves away from the great injustice foisted upon the Sagarans.” He tilted his head back, staring into the blue. “That night, they crept into Sagara, drove out the raiders, slew the pirate Majdul, and freed the captive villagers.” He looked over to the dojo, the garden, and the dormitories. “So began all this.”

Koan was familiar with the story of the Ashen Order’s origin—every initiate learned it in his or her first year—so he remained quiet. The grandmaster surely had a reason for relaying it now. Qora, however, exhibited less restraint.

“Grandmaster? Why bring us here? Why tell us this story again?”

The monk’s gaze drifted from the dojo to Qora. “I want you to tell me what happens next.”

“The grandmasters promised to protect the village and offered to teach anyone with—”

"No," interrupted the grandmaster, turning to face them. "That is what *happened*. Tell me what *happens* next."

Furrows split Qora's forehead as she stared at the grandmaster. "I do not understand."

"And the desert is hot. Now that we have both stated the obvious, I want you to tell me what happens next."

Qora opened her mouth as if to respond, stopped short, and then pressed her lips together. Koan had no answer either, so he likewise kept still. After several moments of quiet, the grandmaster addressed them again.

"The day after the two of you stumbled up this slope, I set out for Ojin myself. I found half the village burnt to ash, the other half picked cleaner than a week-old carcass in the desert. Crates shattered, glasswork broken. Dried blood stained the ground."

The unease Koan felt changed from the selfish concern over the secret he guarded to a deep sadness at the fate of his friends, his neighbors.

"None of that surprised me, of course," continued the grandmaster. "Raiders raid, after all. There was one thing, however, that did strike me as unusual." The grandmaster paused, his eyes narrowing a fraction. "There were no people. There were bodies, yes, but no survivors wandering the streets as I had expected. When I returned to Ash Peak, I ordered monks to every village on the coast for two reasons. The first was to seek out other survivors."

A flicker of hope danced within Koan. "Did they find any?"

Sympathy filled the grandmaster's eyes as he shook his head. "No."

Koan sighed. "And the second reason?"

"I was certain additional raids were imminent."

"But they weren't," said Qora, a bitter note creeping into her tone. "Ojin was the only one attacked."

Grandmaster Tam shifted his gaze to Qora. "Up until a fortnight past, that was true."

Koan stood a little taller, his back straightening. Qora likewise stiffened beside him. "What?"

From Ash Comes Fire

“This morning I spoke to one of the village merchants, just returned from a trade caravan. They passed through Gelay, or at least what remained of it. The village was in shambles, burnt and raided. The caravan hurried north to Ortallius, hoping to find help and instead found it in ruin.” Grandmaster Tam’s expression darkened. “Cherban as well. And Rathmana. Four small villages raided. Hundreds dead. Even more taken.”

Qora, her voice as quiet as the desert wind, asked, “Were there any survivors?”

The grandmaster gave a short, mournful shake of his head. “None that have been found.”

Picturing a map in his head, Koan mentally traced a path from village to village, south to north. A lump of worry formed in his throat as he realized where the line led. “Sagara is next.”

“And now you understand why I wished to speak with you. Why twelve years have passed between raids, I do not know. Nevertheless, I believe the assault on Ojin and these recent ones are connected. Which makes the two of you the only people to have witnessed such an attack and lived to tell about it.” He took two, slow steps forward. “So, I will ask you once again: have you told me *everything* there is about the raid on Ojin?”

Koan turned to Qora and found her already staring at him. An instantaneous, wordless conversation passed between the twins and, as one, they looked back to the grandmaster.

“No, Grandmaster,” sighed Koan. “We have not...”



The final member of the quartet in the shade rises from her chair. She steps forward, stopping at the porch's edge. The elf stares at the human, her eyes as intense as the midday desert sun. "What is the purpose of knowledge?"

Once again the man pauses, his gaze focused on empty air as he ponders the question. Settling on an answer, he stares back at the dal. "To be applied."

His response brings no reaction whatsoever. The elf's expression is stoic yet fierce. "And how would you apply the knowledge gained from us?"

Sweat beads on the man's forehead, rolls down the bridge of his nose, and drips to the hot sand, evaporating at once. The quiet stretches out, this hesitation longer than any before it.

The dal sighs and turns around, facing her chair. "Go. Return to Sagara. We will not teach you."

The man starts to take a step forward, but stops before he crosses into the shade. "I would right wrongs. Fix what is broken. Restore justice where there is none."

The elf pauses then slowly faces the man. The muscles along her jaw ripple. The tendons in her neck flex. She glares at him, her face a mask of judgment.

The man holds the dal's steady gaze, refusing to bend under its weight.

Ash Peak, summer

~The next day ~

The still night was quiet enough that Qora could hear waves gently lapping at the docks in the harbor below. Fishing boats creaked, rising and falling with the swells.

From Ash Comes Fire

She shifted her weight, hoping to relieve her stiff muscles, and winced as the wooden boards beneath her feet groaned. Only moments before, she had quietly chastised the three white sashes with her, ordering them to cease their worried whispering and not make a sound. She felt the gaze of the young woman to her right but ignored it, keeping her attention on the moonlit harbor.

Six ships were anchored offshore, their white sails glowing in the moonlight. The largest, a massive full-rigged frigate, had appeared on the southwestern horizon not long after moonrise and led the small fleet into the natural harbor with astonishing speed and near-silence. Having grown up in a seaside village, Qora recognized the other ships as a hodgepodge of barques, brigs, and schooners. All were flying the flag that had flown in her nightmares for the last twelve years: a dark banner emblazoned with a pale yellow fist clasping a barbed trident.

After the ships anchored a fair distance offshore, snub-nosed shoreboats were lowered over the side. Between fourteen and twenty raiders filled each boat, a motley mix of races and genders.

For the third time, she counted the shoreboats' occupants, hoping she might arrive at a lower number than the two times previous. When she finished, her number was a dozen higher than last. Two hundred fifty-three. She bit down hard, quietly grinding her teeth.

The white sash to her left leaned close and whispered, a nervous quiver in his voice. "Should we go now?"

Qora took a quick breath of salty seaside air before murmuring her response. "Are the raiders on shore?"

The initiate paused. "Well...no, but—"

"Then we stay."

The young man sighed and returned to peering through one of the horizontal slits Qora had a Sagaran woodworker saw into the warehouse's second floor wall earlier that day.

Qora eyed the initiate, his face lit by the thin beam of moonlight streaming through the hole, and frowned. He

should not be here. None of the white sashes should. They were beyond unprepared for whatever was coming. Yet as every master, all but four sensei, and most of the brothers and sisters were on pilgrimage, white and yellow sashes it was.

"Sensei?" whispered another initiate to Qora's right. "Is that—" Her voice broke. "Is that him?"

Near the bow of one boat were two pinpricks of a dancing, bluish-white light. For a brief moment, she was back in Ojin, kneeling in the sand by the well, staring through the smoke at the man with eyes of sorcerous fire.

Her heart, already beating faster than normal, increased its thudding pace. "Yes," she murmured. "That's—" She stopped short, her eyes narrowing as she studied the figure again.

The man from Ojin had been slender, his head shorn bald. This one had broad shoulders, a strong, muscular neck, and thick head of hair. Despite the fiery eyes, this was not the same man. She was about to reveal her odd findings when the man turned his head, allowing the moonlight to illuminate his profile.

Sucking in a short, quick breath, Qora pulled back from the wall, her eyes wide. With her heart in her throat, she leaned forward, thinking the moonlight had played a trick on her. It had not. She studied the man for several pounding heartbeats. "No..." As she stepped back from the wall, the floorboards creaked loudly, something she barely noticed.

She stood there, trying to puzzle out what she had seen. The white sashes gawked at her with open concern. After several moments, she whispered, "Let's go." Leading the way, she rushed down the steps, the hurried slap of her sandals against the wood echoing in the empty warehouse.



Shrouded in shadows, Koan peeked around the alley corner.

Villagers sprinted down the sand-covered street, toward him and away from the harbor, screaming and shouting just as Grandmaster Tam had instructed. Within moments they were dashing past the alley, kicking up dust. Koan prayed the raiders would not notice that no children were in the crowd. Anyone who hadn't reached their fifteenth year was at the dojo atop Ash Peak, along with the village elders and those who had not volunteered to stay behind.

Koan checked to ensure the dozen monks huddled in the alley behind him were not visible. Spotting an auburn-haired red sash peeking over the top of a crate, he gestured for her to get down. Once she complied, the alleyway appeared empty, a mass of shadows, boxes, and barrels.

Returning his attention to the street, he caught a whiff of smoke on the night air. A disappointed scowl spread over his face. All afternoon, villagers had ported seawater from the bay, using it to soak Sagara's roofs and walls even as the desert's hot sun and dry air negated much of their effort. Koan expected to see fire's orange glow soon.

As the fleeing crowd thinned, Koan turned to slip behind the empty fish barrel he had chosen for his hiding spot but stopped short when he spotted Qora amongst the crowd. Koan froze, confused. She was supposed to be the last one down the way, trailing the villagers to ensure they were safe.

He looked for the white sashes who had been with her, but was unable to pick them out of the crowd. Unlike the rest of the monks hiding about Sagara, Qora and her three initiates were not dressed in order garb. They wore loose-fitting shirts and breeches, making them indistinguishable from the villagers.

Koan dug his nails into the rough sandstone of the wall. "What are you doing, Qora?" he muttered to himself. His concern growing, he peered across the street to the alley opposite him. The sensei hidden there was staring back, his eyebrows arched in silent query. Koan shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. The other sensei frowned and retreated into the shadows.

Koan decided it wise to do the same and, after one last look at his sister, strode deeper into the alley. Facing the monks, he whispered, "We might have a problem. Stay to the shadows, stay alert, and stay *quiet*." With that, he crouched behind his barrel, wondering what had happened to make Qora toss aside the grandmaster's plan.

The crowd darted past the alley's mouth and Koan was only mildly surprised when one slipped into the passageway.

"Koan! Are you—" Qora cut off as he arose.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed, glaring at her as she rushed forward. "What happened? Is something—" He stopped short the moment he could see her eyes, widened not with panic or fear, but with a sort of bewildered sorrow. "What's wrong?"

She halted on the other side of his barrel. "I saw Arri."

Koan blinked once.

Twice.

After the third time, he managed to find his tongue. "You must be—"

"Arri is here. I saw him."

Koan was about to tell her that such a thing was impossible when a new round of cries echoed through the streets, shouts absent any sort of panic. Not villagers. Koan grabbed Qora's wrist and pulled her around to his side of the barrel. He crouched low, tugging his sister down with him. "Tell me *exactly* what you saw," he whispered, peeking over the barrel at the street. "And do it quickly."

"He landed with the first boats and—"

"He's *with* the raiders?" interrupted Koan.

Qora shook her head. "No." A quiet anguish filled her eyes. "He's leading them."

Her murmured announcement left Koan speechless yet again. He stared at her, his brow lined with baffled disbelief, when a man's deep voice cut through the night.

"You three, into the bazaar! Check every stall!"

Twelve years had passed, but Koan recognized the voice at once. Before he realized what he was doing, he had stood.

Raiders swarmed the street, lit torches in hand. Koan's mouth fell open as Arri stepped into view. The brother he long thought dead was wearing a bright white, loose-fitting shirt, black breeches, and polished leather boots. The outfit was identical to that worn by the leader of the raiders in Ojin. Also the same were the unnatural flames dancing where Arri's eyes should have been.

Koan might have stood there until dawn, gaping, had Qora not pulled him back down. Despair filled her voice. "What do we do?"

Koan's mind raced. Several wasted moments later, he twisted around and caught the eye of the red sash hiding behind her crate. "Stay down. When you see the grandmaster's signal, you go. Understand?"

Doubt and concern flashed across the young woman's face. "You're leaving?"

"You'll be fine. Remain calm, remember your training, and trust yourself."

The young woman paused, then nodded once. "Yes, Sensei."

He peeked back over his barrel. Arri was gone, but raiders still roamed the hazy, smoke-filled street. Grabbing Qora's hand, he murmured, "Stay low and keep close."

He led her deeper into the alley, whispering words of encouragement to every monk he passed. As guilty as Koan felt for leaving them, Arri's presence changed everything.



Qora stood in the middle of the street, shoulder-to-shoulder with Koan, facing Grandmaster Tam. Villagers ran past the stationary trio, like water breaking around rocks in a stream. The breeders' pen, where everyone was to meet, was just down the way.

The grandmaster wore a slight frown. "You are certain?"

Qora's response came at once. "I am."

"I have no doubt, Grandmaster," added Koan. "It was Arri."

Grandmaster Tam's chin dropped an inch or two, his gaze falling away to focus on nothing but empty air. His frown deepened. "That is unfortunate."

Qora could think of half a dozen better words to describe the situation. "So...what do we do?"

The grandmaster glanced up. "What do we do?" The skin around his eyes tightened. "We do exactly as we planned. This changes nothing." As Qora blinked several times, unable to comprehend his easy dismissal of this monumental revelation, the monk shifted his gaze to Koan. "You should have remained in position. Now, there is no time for you—"

"We *cannot* kill him!" snapped Qora, finally overcoming her shock.

Grandmaster Tam looked back to her, his head cocked slightly to one side. "You do not have to. I will."

Joining her rebellion, Koan snapped, "*Nobody* is killing him!" He jabbed a finger in the direction of Crimson Bay. "*That* is our brother!"

"No, it is not!" barked the grandmaster, his eyes flashing hot. "Those ships are flying Majdul's banner! Whether that means the man leading them is some twisted manifestation of Majdul returned or something else entirely, I neither know nor care. In the past fortnight, he has burnt four villages to the sand, taking hundreds captive and murdering the rest. He must be dealt with!"

Qora opened her mouth to protest, but the grandmaster threw up a hand, cutting her off. "I will *not* debate this." He pointed down the way, to where several hundred villagers waited in the street. "Their fate outweighs whatever selfish desire brought the two of you running to me like children. Now, get them organized and wait for my signal." Stepping between them, Grandmaster Tam headed toward the harbor, passing the last few stragglers.

Qora stared at his back as he walked away. She wanted to scream, to argue that he was wrong. Yet, she held her tongue.

Several moments passed before a few mumbled words slipped from Koan. "He's right. Isn't he?"

She could not bring herself to answer him and walked toward the villagers. Koan lingered a moment longer and then followed. As she neared the gathered Sagarans, she took a deep breath, held it for a heartbeat, and then slowly exhaled, forcibly extinguishing the flicker of hope burning inside her.



Koan stared down the empty street, a deep scowl on his face.

Once he and Qora settled the villagers with the help of several white sashes, he had nothing to do but grind his teeth until the grandmaster signaled. Every time he chased away the image of his brother barking orders to the raiders, sword clasped in hand and eyes aflame, it would come back a moment later. Letting out an angry grunt, he twisted around and looked behind him to give his mind something else on which to focus.

Smoke from the spreading fires covered the area, obscuring the villagers standing at the back of the crowd. Few were trained in combat—most were glassblowers, bakers, butchers, woodworkers, or tailors, common laborers with nary a proper weapon among them. Most clutched sticks, metal rods, wooden clubs, or tools of their trade. At least the fishermen brandished knives, although their blades were meant for gutting fish, not people. The Subin brothers stood at the front of the pack, each with an axe slung over his shoulder. Koan gave them a grim nod, which they returned.

Facing forward, his gaze fell upon Qora. She was staring up at the night sky. "Remember the brawling square at the festival?" he asked.

Qora never lowered her eyes. "Of course."

"Do you remember what Grandmaster Tam told us? About doing what is right because it is right? Regardless of who we may upset or offend?"

Qora gave him a puzzled frown. "Where is this leading, Koan?"

He paused before answering, hesitant to give voice to his thought. "What if Grandmaster Tam is wrong?"

Qora's eyes narrowed. "About what?"

"About Arri. About Majdul. About whatever is happening here. About what has to happen tonight."

"Oh, how I wish he were..." She shook her head. "But I don't think he is."

"How can you be sure?" pressed Koan. "Our brother would *never* do what's been done to those villages. Something is making him do this." He jerked his head at the smoky village. "What if there was a way to stop it?"

Qora's brow furrowed. "What are you suggesting?"

"Honestly?" Koan shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

A thoughtful scowl spread over Qora's face. After several moments, she opened her mouth. "Perhaps you're—"

A shrill whistle split the night as a white, fiery streak shot up from the village and into the sky where it exploded in a burst of sparkling blue and yellow. A chest-thumping boom, much like a rogue clap of thunder, shook Sagara.

As the blast echoed about the village and faded into the desert, screams and shouts took its place. The fight was underway.

Koan turned to his sister. "Qora?" Her name alone carried with it a number of questions he was confident she understood.

She stared at him for a moment, her lips pressed tight, then nodded toward the sound of fighting. "They need our help." Facing the villagers, she shouted, "It's time! Remember, keep moving, drive them back to the shore, and *stay together!*"

The citizens' heads bobbed up and down, their eyes wide and fearful. Each knew there was a good chance death was waiting.

Looking back to Koan, Qora said, "Do what your heart tells you is right." With that, she took off down the street. The white sashes followed at once, as did the mass of villagers, forcing Koan to move instead of simply staring after his sister.

Sprinting ahead, he caught up to Qora and, together, led the herd of people through the streets and toward the screaming.

The smoke thickened the closer they got to the harbor, the acrid haze catching in Koan's throat. While he managed to suppress his urge to cough, many of the villagers could not, and one after another began hacking. The shouting ahead grew louder, and soon Koan spotted the soft orange halos of torches dancing about the darkness.

Rounding a corner, he saw a tall, blue-sashed monk surrounded by three raiders, each with a sword. Koan recognized the monk at once. He was a Halasian, pale-skinned with golden hair, and one of the better martial students to come through the order in years. Koan had sparred with him a number of times, learning well the weight of the northman's blows.

The monk stood perfectly still, knees bent. He grasped a small wooden club, waiting for the raiders to advance. The moment one did, the Halasian lunged, bouncing from attacker to attacker. He darted around the trio like a sand wasp, knocking aside their wild swings and then striking back, jamming the rounded club tip into their guts and faces. The exchange was over within moments. All three raiders were sprawled in the sand, one gasping for air while the other two lay on their backs, noses bloodied, either unconscious or dead. The monk glanced up, met Koan's gaze. After a quick nod, the northerner sprinted into the haze.

Not a dozen paces later, Koan and Qora burst into a pocket of clearer air and straight into the heart of the fight. Up and down the street, raiders and monks clashed, kicking up sand as they exchanged blows. To Koan's right, two raiders had driven a yellow-sash against a building's wall. They rained blow after blow down on the young man, their iron swords hacking into the monk's wood staff.

Koan bolted for the trio, his heart in his throat as one of the men slipped an attack past the initiate's staff. The yellow-sash still managed to sidestep the blow, a shower of sparks flying as the raider's sword ricocheted off a stone support wall. Off balance, the monk had no chance to avoid the other raider's

attack. He screamed as the man's blade bit into his upper arm. Blood gushed from the sliced flesh. Before the first drop fell to the sand, Koan attacked.

Without slowing, he leapt into the air and drove the ball of his foot into the side of the raider's knee. Tendons popped and snapped. The man buckled, dropping his sword while crying in agony. As he collapsed to the ground, Koan placed a foot on the man's chest and launched himself toward the second raider. Bones cracked as he slammed his foot into the man's jaw. The raider's head snapped back and he toppled to the ground.

Landing, Koan set his feet in the sand and pivoted, scanning the area around him for immediate threats. Seeing none, he turned to the initiate. The young man was slumped against the wall, his right hand clamped over the wound.

Koan grabbed the initiate's wrist and pulled his hand aside. "It's not deep. You'll be fine," Koan assured him. Ripping off a piece of his shirt, he tied it over the wound. "Can you still fight?"

The monk bent his elbow twice. "I think so."

"Good." Koan retrieved the initiate's dropped staff and held it out to him. "Stay calm. Stay focused."

The man accepted the weapon and nodded. "Yes, Sensei."

Returning his attention to the fight, Koan found a much different scene than only moments before. The mob of villagers was moving down the way, pushing the raiders toward the harbor. Several had engaged the bandits, three or four against one. He looked for Qora, but could not see through the crowd. Leaping atop a barrel, he continued his search. But the smoke and chaos, along with the fact that she was not wearing her robes, made it impossible to pick her out.

He was about to jump down and return to the fight when he spotted Grandmaster Tam emerging from the confused mess. The grandmaster darted beneath a large awning and into an alley. A moment later, Arri burst free of the crowd and followed the monk.

Koan stared at the empty space where his brother had

just been. Then he peered back to the smoke-filled street and raging battle.

The alley. The street.

The villagers. His brother.

Loosing a muttered curse, he jumped from the barrel. His feet thumped into the sand and he headed for the alleyway, still not entirely sure what he would do once he got there. He weaved through the crowd, pausing several times to unleash a single, sudden strike on an unsuspecting raider. Then he would dash away, the shouted thanks of villagers chasing him into the haze.

When he reached the mouth of the alley, he skidded to a stop. While shadows and smoke engulfed the length of the passage, the next street over was lit up with moonlight and a soft orange glow. Two figures locked in battle danced past the opposite end.

Koan was a dozen paces down the alley before realizing he had even moved. Villagers' desperate screams chased him down the way, bouncing off the walls, echoing in his ears, urging him to go back. He shut them out. Right or wrong, he had made his decision.

He sprinted through the alley, darting around crates and barrels, a broken wagon wheel, a pile of rocks. Bursting from the shadows and into the moonlight, he halted. Across the street and to his left, fire engulfed several wooden buildings, the structures' supports, roofs, and heavy cloth awnings aflame. Silhouetted against the bright orange were Grandmaster Tam and Arri.

While the grandmaster was a whirling frenzy of arms and legs, Arri moved just as fast, whipping his sword about as if the weapon were weightless. The monk's movements were purely defensive, doing whatever he could to block Arri's lunging attacks, to keep the flashing blade at bay. Arri advanced, quickly driving the grandmaster back. A wicked sneer marred Arri's face, the intense fires where eyes should be flaring hot with fury. He hacked and sliced at the grandmaster, shouts of vengeful rage punctuating each blow.

In that moment, Koan's heart sank. The pain he felt when his brother had sacrificed himself to save them paled in comparison to the agony that now gripped him. His chest constricted. His heart shattered. He had been wrong. Though the pirate wore his brother's face, that creature was not Arri. It was Majdul.

"We need to help him." Qora stood beside Koan, her gaze fixed on the pair battling in the street.

Koan wanted to refuse, to tell her that the man in the street was not their brother. That Arri was gone. Yet he could not force those words to his lips.

Qora turned to him, the deep, tortured sorrow in her eyes mirroring his own. "I mean the grandmaster. We have to help him. Arri—" She stopped, biting down hard. "That *thing* is too fast. Even for the grandmaster."

Koan nodded, relieved that she had come to the same conclusion. "Move swiftly."

Qora's expression shifted to one of cold determination. "Move with purpose."

Koan pressed his lips together. The pirate had nearly driven the grandmaster back to where the twins stood. He rushed forward with Qora at his side, his sandaled feet digging into the road's soft grit.

With every stride he took, Koan reminded himself that this person—this thing—was not his brother. He tried clearing his mind—to reach the eye of the storm raging within. Yet calm eluded him. More so than it had in years, even when he wore a white sash.

He was a mere dozen paces from the enemy's back when he found his center.

The night's screams, the fires' roar and crackling fell away, muffled as though he had wads of cloth stuffed in his ears. The blurred movements of the pirate and the grandmaster seemed to slow. Every detail about his opponent grew sharper, more defined.

The cross-stitching on his boots.

How he stutter-stepped before launching a thrust.

The trident-shaped hilt guard of his sword.
How he dipped his right shoulder when stabbing.
The raised scars along his left forearm.

Koan took it all in, absorbing what was useful, discarding what was not, and readied his attack. There was no need to confer with Qora, to devise a strategy or discuss tactics. For the last twelve years, they had trained with—and against—one another nearly every day.

Anticipating Qora would go for the target's lower back, Koan focused on his legs. At a half-dozen paces away, he dropped his knee to the sand, extended his other leg forward, and slid, aiming for Majdul's heel. Qora flew over Koan and struck the side of their opponent's lower back just as the arch of Koan's foot jammed against Majdul's boot. Rather than taking the pirate's foot out from under him, Koan instead popped straight up and adjusted his approach, jabbing his elbow into Majdul's left hip. Pressing off with his leg, he sprang away just as the pirate unleashed a wicked counterattack, swinging the sword at Koan's chest.

The blade's tip missed Koan's flesh but caught his sash, slicing it in two. As the brown cloth slipped from his shoulder, Koan leapt forward, arm cocked, and threw a punch at Majdul's thigh. A sweeping kick from Qora distracted their foe, allowing Koan's blow to connect, his knuckles stabbing deep into the muscle, deadening it.

Majdul stumbled, letting out a fury-fueled bellow. Koan hesitated for a moment, chilled by the unrecognizable rage echoing in the voice that had once been his brother's. His pause nearly cost him as the pirate spun, whipping the sword around, its arc level with Koan's neck.

Dropping to the ground like a sack of grain, Koan felt the blade brush his hair as it whistled past. He struck the street with a solid thud and rolled to his right, trying to put distance between him and Majdul. Expecting the sword's metal to bite into his leg, back, or arms, he flipped three times then stopped. Spitting out a mouthful of sand, he peered back to his opponent. Majdul was on his knees, his fire-eyes fixed on

Koan. To his right, Qora sprung back. She must have knocked him down.

Koan pressed his palms onto the street, readying to shove himself to his feet and rejoin the fight when Grandmaster Tam suddenly appeared behind Majdul. Reaching his arm around the pirate's face, the monk grabbed the side of Majdul's jaw and braced his other arm against the back of his opponent's skull, gripping the pirate's ear. With a violent jerk, he twisted the raider's head. The loud cracking of bones shot through the street.

Majdul went limp, his sword falling to the sand with a soft *thunk*. Grandmaster Tam released his grip and the body toppled over, landing on its left side. The pirate's head flopped about until setting in the sand, his fiery eyes still locked on Koan. They burned bright for a brief moment before they extinguished, winking out as would a candle starved of air. In two breaths, the fires went dark.

Kneeling in the street, Koan stared at the corpse, his heart pounding. Sweat dripped down his brow as a confusing mixture of elation, relief, and deep, soul-wrenching sorrow washed over him. He felt trapped between mourning his brother and rejoicing in his enemy's defeat. Shock shoved all of that aside as a great, keening wail filled the night. Koan clapped his hands over his ears and gaped, fascinated and horrified, as a brilliant orb of pulsing white light shot from Majdul's slack-jawed mouth.

Brighter than a full moon, the ball of light darted over Koan and soared skyward, flying over the raider's ships moored in Crimson Bay, ever accelerating. Upon reaching the open sea, its eerie wail faded into the night. Koan stared after the orb for several moments, trying to understand what he had witnessed. He wondered if Majdul had truly been vanquished.

Twisting around, he found Qora kneeling beside the corpse, her hand gently resting on its shoulder. Koan's throat caught as his gaze fell to a familiar face. The wickedness was gone, the angry sneer replaced by the barest of smiles.

This was Arri, the brother they had lost twelve years before. The brother they had waited so long to mourn.

Koan climbed to his feet and shuffled forward. Qora looked up as he approached, her eyes glistening with reflections of fire and moonlight. The sight sent tears rolling down Koan's cheeks. Standing behind her, he placed a hand on his sister's shoulder. She took hold of it at once, squeezing his fingers. Neither twin uttered a word.

Several moments passed before Grandmaster Tam approached. He knelt beside Arri, brushing a hand over their brother's face and closing his eyelids. "May Anashti grant you greater peace in death than you knew in life."

Qora's grip on Koan's hand grew even tighter. A new flood of tears rolled down his cheeks, falling to the sand.

A heartbeat later, Grandmaster Tam rose to his feet. "Come. Our fight is not yet done." He turned down the street, heading toward the clamor of battle.

Koan knew he should go, but could not bring himself to look away from Arri. Qora remained at his side, motionless as he. Out of the corner of his eye, Koan noticed Grandmaster Tam stop.

"Masters Gamysh? I require your assistance."

As one, the twins looked up, but only Qora spoke, her voice thick with emotion. "Did you call us...masters?"

"Master Qora Gamysh." He turned his gaze to Koan. "And Master Koan Gamysh. I know how difficult this was for you. How difficult this *is* for you." Lowering his stare to Arri, he sighed. "However—" his eyes snapped back up to them "—I ask that you mourn your brother later. Sagara needs your help *now*."

Koan looked down at Qora. After another one of their swift, silent conversations, Qora gave his hand one last squeeze and rose to her feet. Facing the monk, they replied in unison. "Yes, Grandmaster."

The trio hurried down the street, past the fires, ready to repel the raiders.



Finally, the elf breaks her silence. "The world is shattered, filled with more wrongs than can be righted."

"You speak true," concedes the man "So...I will right the ones I can, and teach others to do the same."

She lifts a single eyebrow. "And if you find something broken that cannot be fixed? An injustice that cannot be rectified? What will you do then?"

This time, the man answers without hesitation. "The best I can."

The elf resumes her silent study of the man. After several moments, she lets out a faint sigh, raises a hand, and motions toward a black boulder at the foot of the porch stairs. "Sit."

The man crosses into the shade and settles on the boulder, relishing the relief from the sun's glare. He stares up to find the third Teir'Dal perched in her chair again, having sat down without making a sound. Her stern expression chases away his slight smile of contentment.

"Consider this your first lesson, Initiate."

The man leans forward, ready to learn.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R.T. Kaelin is an accidental writer.

After graduating from Ohio University with a degree in communications, he spent the first decade of his professional career in the IT industry. While in search for a hobby, he joined a local gaming group and soon found himself writing short stories for his fellow players. When urged to try his hand at something larger, R.T. threw caution to the wind.

Progeny, the first volume in *The Children of the White Lions* series was published in late 2010. The book garnered critical acclaim and hit #7 on the top-rated historical fantasy list at Amazon. *Prophecy*, the sequel, followed his debut novel's successful path. His works and writing style has drawn comparisons to the giants of the genre, praise that he humbly welcomes.

Learn more at www.RTKaelin.com.