

# Desert Rain

By Lorenzo Hall

## CHAPTER 1

Kenta decided that the Desert had to be the absolute worst place for someone to live. He couldn't tell what he hated more, either the chill of the freezing nights or the blistering heat and the blowing sand. He trudged on through it, at his side was his trusted partner, Kei. The blonde and blue haired woman was a couple years older than him. Her eyes were deep red and she was wearing a dark blue and yellow scarfed garb, signature of her people. Stoically, she walked the desert beside him. Though she was silent during travel, Kenta knew she was there for him if he needed her, which he knew he would.

As Kenta watched the sun set, he began to wonder how far they were from their destination. It had been three days since they first came to the desert, and lately water and food conservation had become an issue. They had enough food to last them two more days, but water was becoming increasingly scarce. It made Kenta wonder that if the civilization was as close as others said it was, then how could the people go on without water for such long periods of time? As he thought to himself he took out the bottle he had with him and began to drink, making sure not to gulp down too much.

“According to the people we spoke to at the inn, we’re supposed to reach the city tomorrow, is that right?”

“It is,” Kei replied, swiftly and succinctly.

“Good. Then we’ll set up camp for the night before it gets too cold,” Kenta said before getting his tools from the bag and setting up the tents. Beside him, Kei had already gotten out the wood and tinder for making fire. She laid the wood on the sandy ground below first.

“Would you like to start the fire?”

“I would. Thank you,” Kenta said with a smile before he drew his sword. It was what appeared to be a rapier-like blade. It was small and thin, meant to move swiftly and rapidly through the air and those who opposed it. The metal gave off a bright, golden sheen, much like the pommel. Touching it, its wielder felt a familiar warmth, one that radiated through his body and calmed him. Placing its edge against the center of the wood, he watched as a small flame started where the sword had touched.

Smiling with self-satisfaction, Kenta sheathed his sword. Kei grinned back slightly at him.

“Did I do something funny, Kei?”

“No. I had a feeling you would enjoy that. The last few times I tried to start a fire for us you would beat me to it with Solan. I thought it would be worth it to see you smile like that when you succeeded, just like the times before now.”

“Thank you, Kei, I appreciate it. Still, I need to make sure Solan is used for more than starting campfires, otherwise I’m not fit to wield it,” Kenta said as he went back to securing the tents, making sure the pegs would hold despite the shiftiness of the sand.

“And that attitude ensures you shall,” Kei added as she dug out some dried meat and bread they had purchased. “Now we should eat.”

“At this point jerky does sound good, even though I’d rather have some of grandpa’s filleted fish,” Kenta said as he took a nibble of the salty piece of dried beef. It wasn’t lacking in taste, but having eaten it for the past few days had made him grow weary of it.

“You could very well have been eating it now if you did not insist on leaving so soon.”

“Yeah, but I feel the need to follow my dreams. Literally.”

“Dreams often are important. Both our waking and resting ones. Still, for this moment let us focus on what is before us, surviving another day.”

“Right,” Kenta muttered before finishing the jerky. “To be honest, I’d settle for hunting for lizards to cook. Or maybe something bigger.”

“Provided you find something that is not poisonous or that you know how to clean properly, I shall happily help.”

The duo soon turned in for the night, hoping the day ahead would hold more promise.

The next morning was, in fact, less promising than Kenta and Kei had hoped. After packing away their supplies they spent hours and hours trying to head to their destination. There was hope in the form of the occasional trees and blades of grass.

Kenta could sense that water was close by, and that meant that people could be as well. Still, neither he nor Kei saw any path to people, water, or civilization. Internally he

lamented not getting a map. It might have had locations of water at least, if not the city they were trying to reach.

Just when Kenta was about to ask Kei if they were heading in the right direction for sure, he suddenly felt a strange sensation. Stopping in his tracks he went to his left, completely opposite of Kei.

“Is something bothering you?” she mumbled.

Kenta stopped despite feeling something pulling him. It was as if something important was waiting for him, beckoning him onwards.

“Not exactly. Can you wait for me here?”

“If I must. Just do not tarry too long.”

“I promise not to,” Kenta said before departing. Kenta knew wandering around in an unfamiliar environment wasn’t smart, but he had to follow his instincts. It felt like there was a flowing sensation, one that urged him onwards. He continued to walk, finding small tufts of grass growing here and there in the sand. If there was grass there certainly had to be water.

To his relief, there was. He soon found himself near several small plants, decorating the banks of a large body of water, clear and reflecting all that could be viewed on the surface. Absently, he looked at the water and saw his own reflection in the serene pond. He was a young man of twenty with jet-black hair, light violet eyes, and a dark complexion. For the most part, he resembled a human being, except his ears, situated atop his head, triangular in shape and resembling those of felines and a long tail that was as black as his hair, other than the white tip.

After looking at his reflection, he decided to observe the area a bit more. He saw that there were several of small pools of water and a few shady trees along with blades of grass nearing the muddy edge of the water. Kenta smiled in relief before wiping some sweat from his brow. All that desert travel had been tiring and he and Kei did need their water refilled. His plan was to simply obtain all the water he could before heading back and sharing what he had with Kei.

Slowly he began to fill the canteens, smiling as he packed them away. Standing near the wet, muddy banks, he also noticed a few apricots growing on the trees, looking ripe and ready to be eaten.

This is almost too perfect, Kenta thought, as he began to pluck a few apricots. He stopped suddenly when he heard a noise.

“Hey you! That isn’t yours to take!”

Turning sharply, Kenta's eyes met hers. A brief moment of shock was felt by him. They were those of a young woman draped in a large and tattered beige cloak, which for moments became like the sand if not for it, billowing against the desert wind. Her hair shined in the light, enhancing the auburn color and complimenting her unique, shimmering eyes. She took pause before Kenta, giving the strange boy a cold stare as quiet as the whispering winds that crashed against them both.

“Does this oasis belong to you?” Kenta asked her, wondering where she came from.

The woman nodded in confirmation. “It does. You can’t steal this water or the fruit,” she told him, almost threateningly. “I think you better run away before I hurt you. It wouldn’t end well for someone as inexperienced as you.”

“I’m not here to steal, but I won’t be talked down to either,” Kenta said, annoyed and flustered. He then showed off the still sheathed Solan to the stranger. “Besides that, I’ve got the advantage, if we were to trade blows. I’m armed.”

“I’m scared,” she replied sarcastically before waving him off. “Now beat it or else I’ll take you down, sword or no sword.”

“Is that a challenge?” Kenta asked, a huge competitive spirit overtaking him. He wasn’t one to dismiss an enemy because of their gender. If she was challenging him he wanted to test his skill.

“Maybe. Why don’t you pull out that fancy bread slicer of yours and we see?”

Kenta smirked, she was a smart aleck, but he looked forward to showing her his moves. He was confident that he could defeat her before the situation got too dangerous. He started by placing his hand on Solan’s grip, but he didn’t want to do any serious damage to her.

He decided he’d open with a simple attack with the pommel of his blade. Drawing and stepping forward, he meant to hit her with the butt of his sword and get her off balance. He was surprised when she immediately blocked with two blades she had hidden beneath her cloak.

Gripped firmly in her hands was a pair of bright, silver scimitars, previously hidden by her now open cloak. The handles were as white as the stars, crimson bloody red gems and gold borders adorned them. She blocked his blow with equivalent force before she began to push back aggressively, trying to out brawn her rival. To her surprise, she wasn’t having much success.

“Alright, maybe you aren’t weak,” she admitted before hopping back in the sand and getting her blades at ready. “But let’s see how strong you are.”

Drawing Solan fully, Kenta stood and waited for her to strike. She came at him fast, performing a single slash with her right blade, which Kenta parried, feeling the metal of their weapons clash. With her other sword, the desert dweller tried to slice him once more, but Kenta blocked again before going on the offensive. He was attacking, moving just as fast as his enemy had. She blocked with one blade, although she didn’t expect Kenta’s strike to be as strong as it was. She buckled under the pressure and retreated a few steps back to gain distance. She then went at him again, angered, but focused.

Kenta was trying to think of a way he could quickly overcome offensive disadvantage. The enemy having two swords meant she was able to attack him repeatedly and was able to block blows more easily. Even so, Kenta could tell he was faster than her and his style more polished. Hers was rough and instinctual, but she knew what she was doing. It was as if experience had been her teacher more than any tutor had when it came to actual combat. While her attacks weren’t particularly graceful, she was confident in her moves and familiar with her blades.

Kenta dodged her next two strikes, but the third cut him on his arm, slicing his flesh and his blood spilling forth. Kenta winced, but he didn’t let it distract him. If he lost focus he would lose his life. He tried to use his superior speed and strength to his advantage. Rushing in, he hit both of her sides with his sword, slicing her before she attacked again. Kenta pushed back, his rapier against her scimitars. In the heat of the moment, Kenta realized that a longsword would give him an advantage in the fight.

Suddenly Solan began to glow and widen, the fine edge growing into a wider sword, with the hilt changing as well to be circular with two gemlike protrusions on either side with one similar jewel at the sword's base. With his new longsword in hand, he was able to push past the girl's defenses and then he attempted to slash her once more.

Moving quickly, she leaned back, completely avoiding the attack. Growing enraged and frustrated, she began to attack Kenta more rapidly, her twin swords singing in the air as they sliced at the dark skinned fighter. It took all of his focus and his reflexes to keep her at bay. Blocking, dodging, deflecting, parrying. There wasn't a moment to think, only to react. Her onslaught continued until he saw her slow. It was then that he went on the offensive again. She blocked with both blades, trying to push him back so he'd lose his footing in the shifting sand. Even so, Kenta dug his feet into the ground, breathing heavily and pushing back just as hard before he pulled his blade back and stabbed at her again and again, missing as she began to fight harder.

They were evenly matched until the woman jumped at him, bringing her blades down as hard as she could. The force of the blow made Kenta drop Solan and fall down.

Smirking, the mysterious woman stepped on the blade and pointed hers at him. "Okay, you're good, but I think this has gone on long enough. Ready to give up?"

Before Kenta could even answer, he saw that, from seemingly nowhere, Kei had appeared, her arm around the stranger's neck, and a small dagger in her hand, ready to be used if need be

"Actually, I think you may wish to stop," Kei whispered. "Now, please drop your weapons and step aside."



“I’d do as she asks. If you had that much trouble with me, you’ll probably only last a minute against her, at best.”

Slowly, the woman dropped her swords. Kei then guided her away and put away the dagger that was at the attacker’s throat before tossing Solan to Kenta and picking up the two scimitars. As Kenta picked it up, it returned to its original, rapier-like form

“I appreciate the cooperation, now do you care to tell me why you were attacking my friend?”

“He’s trespassing on my oasis. I found it myself a week ago.”

“Wait, you don’t legally own it?” Kenta asked, getting up.

The woman shook her head. “There aren’t exactly deeds in the desert. General rule is finders keepers.”

“So, to make sure I’m clear, you were about to kill me over fruit and water you don’t even own?” Kenta asked again. The young woman just gave him a glare before trying to wipe flecks of sand from her long auburn hair.

“Look, around here water is about as precious as gold, especially water from oases. I need this stuff to survive for now; it’s my meal ticket, literally.”

“I see. Well then I guess we’ll leave it all to you then,” Kenta said before looking at Kei. “I managed to get some water and a bit of fruit for us. It should last us until we reach town.”

“Excellent. Then we best move on our way,” Kei said, picking up the swords the woman had dropped. “Perhaps we should take these?”

“No. Please give them back to that woman,” Kenta requested. Kei looked at him curiously.

“Is that wise, Kenta? She might attack us again.”

“Maybe, but a desert is a harsh environment and she might need protection from actual threats. We don’t really have any right to take those from her and she might need them,” Kenta said before looking at the stranger. “We’ll leave these here with you. Be safe.”

With that, Kenta and Kei left the blades for the woman in the cloak to pick up. As the two of them started to go off she spoke up.

“Wait. You two are going the wrong way. I can take you both to town,” she said. “Listen, I’m sorry I tried to attack you, but you’re gonna need those wounds cleaned before long and you can do that in town. I need to go there anyway to see if I can “sell” this oasis to someone. I can make a little cash off of it if I play it right.”

“And why would you help us?” Kei questioned, suspiciously.

“You gave back my swords after our little scuffle, so you aren’t as bad as I thought you were. I guess I should be nice back as thanks for not screwing me over,” the woman said. “My name is Tula. Who’re you two?”

“Kenta Morcades.”

“Kei Sessara.”

“Nice to meet you both. Kenta you’re an Ellon, right?” Tula asked as she picked up her swords and looked at his ears and tail. Kenta nodded in confirmation, to which Tula began to feel his feline ears as she was approaching him. It surprised Kenta given her earlier aggression. “We don’t see a lot of your people around here. I’ve probably only seen a couple my entire life.”

“I guess that means it’s mostly humans around here, then,” Kenta said. “Kei and I have only been here for a short time. She and I live on the main island of the Lurion Islands.”

“Really? Well, let’s walk and talk. If I’m going to trek through this hot sand it’d be nice to have a good conversation,” Tula said before going to refill her own water and tossing the two of them one apricot each. “I’d take more, but I need fruit on the tree as proof that there’s more than water here.”

“I didn’t know fruit trees could grow in a desert.”

“They can. Apples, cherries, grapes, and pears; just to name the proper ones. You just gotta take care of them. I lucked out with this one, and that’ll make it more valuable! I just need a week in town to find a buyer and a place to stay in the meantime.”

“And what will you do after that?” Kenta asked Tula.

She paused for a second before answering. “I might go searching for other oases or take a vacation. To be honest, I was also thinking of doing a bit of bodyguard work. As you can see I know a little bit about using swords.”

“Who taught you? Nobody I know uses two swords at once. I’m told it’s counter-productive unless you’ve been specifically trained for years.”

“That’s a trade secret, friend, but I’ll tell you my teacher gave me the crash course. I may know how to do the basics, but I need to polish it a bit.”

“I know you’ll be amazing when you do,” Kenta finished as he followed her. For a time it was silent again, but Tula wanted to know a little more about her companions.

“So, what about you? Where did you learn?”

“I had a tutor,” Kenta said simply. “It took a few years, but I became competent enough to hold my own in a serious fight.”

“And your sword? It looks great, but it’s weird,” Tula commented.

Kenta looked at her curiously. It seemed as if Tula was observant, but he wondered exactly how observant she was.

“Weird how?” Kenta asked, feigning ignorance.

“May I see it?” Tula asked.

“I would advise against it,” Kei said to Kenta. “It is your decision, however.”

“I want to see what she thinks. Besides, if she’s our ally now, I’d like to show her trust.”

“Very well.”

Obliging an appreciative Tula, Kenta handed her Solan.

Tula slowly unsheathed the blade and placed it neatly on her hands. “Being a rapier, it’s meant for fast and precise thrusts. Now this one is broad enough to cut and has two edges, not all do. That’s just the surface though, the real thing is it shouldn’t have been able to withstand all of those hits the way you were using it. I would have expected it to have broken, and then there’s the material the sword is made from.”

“What do you mean?” Kenta asked her, trying his best to stifle a grin. It seemed she was knowledgeable about different types of swords.

“Gold is a soft metal,” Tula explained. “So, it’s not exactly good for sword making, same for silver and tin. Also your sword has no chips or signs of damage from our fight, even though a harder metal like steel would. I can’t say the same about the two of my swords not being chipped.”

After her explanation Tula handed Solan back to Kenta who sheathed his sword. He smiled at her.

“So, you know a bit about swords?”

“I dabble. That’s nothing too in depth, though,” Tula added. “Whatever yours is, it’s precious. Especially if it’s able to change into a broadsword in the middle of a fight.”

“You’re right. Solan’s not an ordinary sword. I’ll show you some of what it can do later.”

“I’m eager to see. Can you at least tell me about your friend? She’s quiet.”

“But my hearing works well,” Kei announced, breaking her silence. “One could say I am a bit of a bodyguard. Kenta and I have been together for years.”

“Oh? So you two are a couple then?” Tula laughed impishly. Kenta and Kei exchanged glances with one another before chuckling to each other, completely amused by Tula’s comment. The amber-eyed woman began to flush with embarrassment. “What? Was I way off?”

“Incredibly. Kei and I are good friends, nothing more.”

“We are more comparable to siblings than anything else.”

“Hm, well I guess that means you two have known each other for a while?” Tula asked again.

“Quite a while.”

“About eight years.”

“Hmm, there’s got to be a story there,” Tula commented.

Kenta just smirked at her. As he began to mull over his actions he saw that they were close to the city.



## CHAPTER 2

The city of Isten was large and vast. Several buildings were visible from the entrance and a few hastily made stands. They were tall and looked ancient, as if they had been there for centuries. Somehow, though they reminded him of home, even though the area was drastically different from where he was born.

Once they entered the city Kenta and Kei saw many people going about here and there, conversing or heading into the myriad of buildings. A few people who walked around the streets had more ragged clothes while most of the others had on plain clothes, with a few of them well dressed.

“This is the main inn. It’s in one of the more popular areas in the city. People come all over to see visitors and try to beg or sell them goods. The inn is affordable from what I hear and pretty comfortable.”

“It does appear to be pleasant,” Kei stated as she and Kenta looked up at the five story tall building. It looked newer than most of the other buildings and it had four trees by the entrance that was full of leaves, casting a fair amount of shade.

“Yeah, but it might be out of our price range if we want to stay for a week and afford to eat,” Tula commented. “But, I do have a way to earn more money if you two want to hear.”

“We probably won’t have to,” Kenta said before looking at Kei. With a nod, she went into her side bag, while Kenta looked Tula in the eyes. “Tula, how much do you charge for bodyguarding?”

“Hm, about 600 Kres a month, not including meals,” she said. “I can live reasonably off that much.”

“Okay, and about this desert; how well do you know it?”

“I know almost all of it and I’ve been to half,” The auburn haired woman said proudly. Kei seemed impressed by this, to which Kenta smiled.

“So if you were to try and go from here to someplace else without a map...?”

“I could take you, but I don’t know if we’ll be together that l-“

“Congratulations. You’re hired,” Kenta said, interrupting Tula before Kei pulled out ten large golden coins. She handed them to Tula, who looked them over.

“What are these?”

“Arels, the money we use in Lurion. That should cover five months salary according to current conversion rates.”

“What?! Are these actual gold?”

“Yes,” Kenta said. “You’ll probably want to break that into smaller change though, we do have some on hand if you’d like.”

“No, this is great,” Tula said, snickering before putting it in her own bag. “Where did you two get all of these?”



“I’ll tell you another time. For now you know you’ll be working as my bodyguard?”

“Sure, but if I can ask, what am I bodyguarding you from?”

“Oh, just in case we run into trouble, and you said you know the area and we could really use you as a guide, too.”

“Especially considering how someone forgot to purchase a map,” Kei added, her tone more playful than chastising.

Kenta rolled his eyes and sighed.

“I’m only human, right?”

“You’re an Ellon, though,” Tula remarked, laughing.

Kenta looked a bit more sheepish. “I’m one fourth human. Anyway let’s just go inside the inn, the heat is killing me.”

“You’re the boss.” Tula grinned slyly before they all went inside the building.

The inn was cooler, though not by much. At the front desk was a beautiful young lady, who had braided black hair and light brown eyes. The innkeeper smiled warmly at them before introducing herself and checking them in. The woman gave them a smile and then handed them a key each.

“Your rooms are on the next floor, 110, 111, and 120. Please come to me if you require anything.”

“We will. It’ll be no problem,” Tula said as she took her key and went up the stairs, looking absolutely pleased. Following behind her, the group soon found their rooms. From the window of Kenta’s room he could see much more of the city than they

had initially seen. In the distance one could see a bazaar, and in other places there were small springs where others could gather water.

“Hmm, now to figure out who I can sell that oasis to,” Tula mused. “Maybe I’ll find someone at the bazaar tomorrow.”

“You just got paid, Tula, why not enjoy your earnings for a while?”

“Because every second I wait is a second someone else could find it,” Tula said. “I’ll just find someone, make arrangements to take them there, and then head back...and maybe buy some new swords, since these ones might be on their last legs.”

“They did well enough against Solan.”

“Yes, and for all that effort I almost broke them on it.” Tula replied before winking. “Besides, what kind of bodyguard doesn’t use top notch weapons while she’s on the job?”

“I like her line of thought,” Kei said with a smile before opening the door to her room. “Still, it has been a long day. I suggest we rest for today and go about business bright and early. Tula, you said you knew someone who could address the injuries you and Kenta have?”

“Yes, they don’t live too far from here,” Tula said, looking at her own injuries. “We should hurry.”

“Lead the way.”

After that, Tula had led Kenta to a small doctor’s office. There had been a few people in front of them, but eventually they made it to the doctor. After Kenta and Tula showed her their injuries she went about fixing them, her manners kind enough, but she

seemed tired from a long day's work. After leaving, Kenta sighed as he looked where was hurt.

“Looks like this place doesn't have medical service like Saepi does. I guess it means it'll take a while to heal.”

“Ahsira is one of the nations that haven't been able to benefit from the technological boom. No one over there has bothered to come and share their advances with us yet. I can't blame them though; it's hard working to build anything in this desert...” Tula said. At first, her tone had its usual levity, but as she spoke it began to grow less cheery and more bitter. He noticed her sudden show of sadness and tried to console her.

“Tula, I'm sorry I complained. I didn't realize how hard you have it.”

“Hey, it's okay. My nation isn't the greatest out there, but it's a fact of life and it's my home. I'm used to it by now,” she said with a faint smile before changing the subject. “Say, why don't we just head back for the night like Kei said? I'm too tired to do anything else tonight.”

“Sure,” Kenta agreed.

With the matter settled, the two of them went back to the hotel, Kenta returning to his room, and Tula to her own. When Kenta went inside he saw Kei was there, waiting for him.

“Hey Kei, how're you?”

“I am well. Were your wounds treated properly?”

“Yes. I'm glad Tula knew where a doctor was.”

“It was rather fortunate, but I have been meaning to ask you a question in confidence,” Kei said before moving to the door. She was quiet, trying to ascertain whether or not there was anyone trying to listen in on their conversation. “Do you think it was wise to hire Tula so readily?”

“Probably not, but she is good and she knows the area,” Kenta said. “We could definitely benefit from having her as part of our group.”

“That is true, but she seemed to take to you awfully fast after she defeated you. I am not entirely sure her motives are sincere.”

“You think she has an angle in all of this?”

“Possibly. She’s already shown that she’s quick to violence, as evidenced by your match with her, and she expressed interest in Solan, and before that she’s shown willingness to sell that which she does not even own. I am surprised she did not try to leave the moment she had been paid.”

Although Kenta was reluctant to admit it, Kei did have a point. At first, he had just taken her offer to join them as a means of apology, but it was a little implausible. Could there really be something more that she wanted, or was it really coming from the kindness of her heart? He didn’t know for sure, but he had to hope it was the former.

“I don’t know if we can trust her entirely, but I think we should wait and see what happens before we come to a decision. You don’t have a problem with that, do you?”

“No, but...If she attempts to harm you again I will have to step in, and I will not be as gentle as last time. Protecting you is the reason I am here, after all.”

“I know, and I understand,” Kenta replied softly before going to the bed and lying down on its firm mattress. Upon his head hitting the pillow he promptly yawned. “Still, it has been a long day. I’m going to go to bed for now.”

“Right. Please rest well.”

“I will, you too.”

With these last words exchanged, Kenta and Kei parted company, the cat eared young man curling up in his bed and yawning a bit more before sleeping. Although the sun had only just begun to set, he felt he would need his strength for tomorrow. In almost no time at all, Kenta slept, going into a dreamless slumber.

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The next day Kenta arose, feeling somewhat refreshed. When he stood from his bed, he stretched, a mannerism he had since childhood, starting with his legs, then his tail and spine, wiggling the former about, and then his arms last. When he was done, he tended to his needs for the morning, cleaning up and bathing before he changed into his clothing for the day, picked up Solan and went to greet Kei and Tula.

Going out, he decided to check on Kei, Kenta knocked on her door. It took a second for her to open, already dressed for the day.

“Hello, how are you this morning?”

“I’m well,” Kenta said. “I was about to go to breakfast. Would you like to come with me?”

“I have errands to run. I will be shopping for our next outing. For now I must to go, but I shall join you for dinner.”

“Okay, take care.”

“I shall.”

After their exchange, Kei left. Kenta decided to invite Tula to go with him. When he knocked on her door, he didn't get an answer. Kenta assumed she was asleep and decided to move on and just get breakfast on his own. He headed downstairs and went to eat his meal by himself, when he was done he decided to explore a bit.

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Walking through the city, Kenta wondered exactly what he'd see. Kenta passed many people, most of them looked to be in good spirits, though there were more than a few who wore rags and seemed dirtier than the rest. The young Ellon was no stranger to seeing the less fortunate, but he was surprised by their numbers.

When he was looking about, he saw a mother with a pair of young children, all of them sitting on a street corner. The mother was curled up, covered in rags and holding her children close, the oldest was a boy of seven and the other a toddler in his mother's arms

He felt disheartened upon seeing them and tried to approach, but as he drew near the mother took her children and ran in fear.

At first Kenta was confused, but then a stranger spoke up.

“It's the sword, friend. They probably think you're a raider.”

Turning Kenta saw an older gentleman, hefty and somewhat balding, tending a stand nearby that had several pieces of pottery or handcrafted goods.

“Those troublemakers tend to try to shake a loose Kres from anyone they can find,” The man commented again. “It's a shame we have thugs and thieves like that around here.”

“I can imagine it is. I just wanted to see if I could help them any.”

“It’s possible, but there are others like them out there who would also want some help. Too many, in my opinion, but I suppose it is life’s way.”

“It doesn’t have to be, not if proper efforts are made,” Kenta said simply before walking away into the bazaar.

Kenta continued to travel amongst the collection of patrons and onlookers in the crowd, going through his pocket and looking to see how much money he had. He had five Arels in his pocket, which was plenty of money, but he didn’t have anything smaller as the rest of the money was with Kei. He decided it would be best to instead observe the areas and see if he saw anything of value in the shops. On the way he passed by people who were clamoring to buy water from a vendor who sold it in large ceramic jars. From what Kenta could see the person was making a large profit. It was no wonder why Tula was so intent on selling the location she found.

As he continued to amble about the area, he noticed a shadow was cast over him as well as a shout.

“Whoa! Look out!”

Turning he saw a young teenaged boy carrying one of those very same jars. He was about to trip and crash right into Kenta.

Holding out his arms, Kenta hoped that it contained water and was pleasantly surprised when the boy stopped mid-fall, supported by his jar, which seemed fixed in place in the air.

Slowly and cautiously, the boy righted himself, confused as to what had just happened.

“Are you alright?” Kenta asked the stranger, who looked at him in confusion. The child nodded slowly and replied.

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. I tripped over a dent in the ground. I’m just lucky my water jar didn’t break.”

“What’s the matter?”

“My family really needs it, but it’s barely enough. This water will get us by until my father can earn more money. This isn’t the first time we’ve had to scrape by, though.”

Touched by the story, Kenta decided to do something charitable.

“Excuse me, can I ask your name, young man?”

“Alen.”

“Alen, I’d like to borrow your jar of water. Trust me and I’ll make sure you are repaid.”

“What’re you going to do with it?”

“You’ll see. For now, please follow me.”

Obeying, the young man followed after Kenta until they reached a clearing with a few stone benches and a single tree casting shade in the middle of the bazaar. What Kenta had planned was risky. He had a certain skill that many did not have, one that he tried not to expose unless the situation called for it. Even so, now was a time he felt it could help him do good. When Alen caught up, Kenta saw him set the jar down in front of him.

“Why’d you bring us here?”

“You’ll see,” Kenta repeated as he took the jar and opened it, peering into the clear blue water within. It gave off a beautiful reflection. As he looked at the water,



Kenta felt a connection to it. Kenta had felt the same when he was at the oasis and before when he stopped the water from falling to the ground. Slowly, he focused on it and watched as a small stream of water rose upwards from it like a small spout from a fountain.

Alen looked at it, awestruck. At first, it was just him, then a few more people noticed. Soon three people became seven, seven became twelve, and twelve became twenty, all wondering about what was going on.

When Kenta was satisfied that he had a sufficient sized crowd he spoke to Alen again.

“Take the lid and hold it up for now. We’ll use it for collections.”

“Oh, right.”

Listening, Kenta began to make the stream rise higher and held it that way for a time. With only so much water he was limited in what he could do, but he could still put on a decent show. For a few minutes people observed but one of the people who had been watching from the beginning came by and dropped a few Kres in the lid. Upon that happening Kenta pulled some droplets from the water and made them circle the water spout in mid-air, earning a few shocked expressions and whispers from the onlookers. After that the money came in more rapidly, two or three people dropped in more money and he made more intricate actions, harder to write off as simple tricks. Amongst them was the water rising and swirling like a visible whirlpool. It spun about, entrancing many and gaining more onlookers and more money in the process. It took thirty minutes before the people more than filled the jar lid with money.

When Kenta saw the pile of money he decided to enact a finale to wrap things up. He condensed the whirlpool into a sphere of water, floating until it became more oval in shape until it resembled an egg. Once the crowd had been able to take a good look at it, Kenta made it turn into a figure resembling a wild horned dragon, one of the long ones with short limbs and great wings. It flew and streamed through the air, making the crowd gasp and cheer, some of them clapping as it zipped overhead and through the air, turning and twisting until it rose high above the jar before diving down inside with a splash. Once it did, Kenta looked at Alen who had stuffed all of the precious coins into his pockets. When he saw the young man had enough funds, Kenta stood and bowed before putting the lid back on the water. Once he was done, people came by and started asking questions.

They inquired if the water was magic, how he had managed to do it, if it was some sort of illusion. It all came so fast he barely had time to even attempt to answer the questions when out of nowhere he felt a hand pull him through the crowd. When he was out and pulled along for a run he saw that his rescuer, or captor, was none other than Tula.

“Come on, before they catch up with us,” she shouted. Despite being confused, Kenta followed along with her, trying to gain his momentum. The two of them quickly fled the area into the backstreets. Once there, Kenta and Tula stood in the shady path, panting and leaning against the hard and stony exterior of a building. Tula looked at Kenta once she caught her breath. She was startled by what he had managed to do. “What the heck was that you did back there? Some kind of magic?”

“Not really. It’s my Syncral,” Kenta said.

Tula looked at him, confused. “Syncral? What’s that?”

“For now let’s head back,” Kenta said. Though he felt bad that he caused a commotion, he was glad he was able to help Alen out. Still, now he’d have to lay low. Fortunately, Tula guided him through other dark, less traveled roads and path, weaving through them as if she knew them by heart and guiding him along behind her. Eventually the duo again made it to the inn and went back inside. This time Tula stuck close to him and followed Kenta, even into his room before closing the door behind her.

Kenta was confused as to what she wanted until she spoke up to him.

“Tell me what all of that was. You said it wasn’t magic, but you didn’t explain what it was or how you did it.”

“Fine,” Kenta said before pulling up a chair from a desk nearby.

With no other recourse, Tula sat down on the bed and listened intently.

### CHAPTER 3

“My ability is called Syncral. Some call it a kind of magic and others think it is spiritually influenced. While there are people are born with it, some simply are not. It allows for an inherent and complete control over select elements. Mine is water.”

For a time, Tula was silent, not sure what to say, but a question soon came to mind.

“If you can control water, why didn’t you do it before when we were fighting in the desert near the oasis?”

“I was about to when Kei intervened. I had thought I could defeat you without it beforehand, but you proved me wrong.”

“Damn right I did. Still, I wish I had known,” she said before standing up. “It’s a valuable skill to have in a place like this. We could find every oasis in the area nobody has claimed and help people get what they need.”

“We could, but I would still need you to guide me. There’s no guarantee I’d find a town if I just walked out into the desert,” Kenta explained.

“I’ll take care of that,” Tula said, “In the meantime I think we should keep you laying low for a while. Otherwise other people will start flocking to you again and who knows what will happen. Speaking of which, can anyone learn to use elements?”

“No, you have to be born with a talent for it, otherwise it won’t work.”

“Damn, I wanted to see if I had any kind of talent for it.” Sighed the auburn haired lady, before she rose and walked towards the door. “I’m starting to get hungry. What do you say you and I get some dinner? It’ll be my treat since you lost all the money you raised today.”

“It was for an acquaintance. He got what he needed.”

“Then I’ll buy because you did your good deed for today. Come on.”

Following behind Tula, Kenta was eager to eat. They soon found food and after their meal was finished, Kei returned and joined them. Soon after, everyone returned to his or her room for the night and rested.

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The following days were uneventful with Tula being away and selling her oasis maps, and Kenta exploring the city incognito with Kei accompanying him. It wasn’t until three days after Kenta revealed his Water Syncral that Tula had any success in her plans.

“I finally managed it!” she proclaimed one afternoon when she had gone to visit Kenta and Kei, filled with an air of self-satisfaction. “I sold all the oasis maps.”

“That is fortunate news. Are you prepared to give away the locations?”

“I already did, and I got my payment right here,” Tula said showing a new bag full of Kres, separate from the one with her advance payment for bodyguarding. With a

large smile on her face she put it away. “Alright you two, I’m ready to move on if you guys are.”

“Kenta? The ultimate decision lies with you,” Kei told him plainly. The young black haired man came to his decision rather soon.

“We’ve done all we need to. It is best for us to leave,” Kenta decided. “We should pack up and head out for the next place.”

“The next closest place would be Rynnade. It would only take a day or so to get there,” Tula said. “From there we could even make it to the Capitol, Sarilar.”

“Then we go now. Let’s get moving.”

After the decision was made, everyone gathered their things and headed out of the city and into the desert once more. With plenty of water and Tula there to guide them, the trip was far less arduous than it had been before. Trudging through the sand was still time consuming, but the trio was able to proceed with better confidence now that they were nearing their destination.

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Hours passed before the group decided to set camp for the night, again starting a fire and setting up tents with provisions. As Kenta, Kei and Tula warmed themselves around the fire in hopes of escaping the frigid air’s bite, Tula spoke up.

“Hey Kenta, Kei, I had a question for the two of you.”

“What is it?” Kenta asked her as he rubbed his hands near the dancing flames.

“What are the Lurion Islands like? I want to know a bit about places outside of the desert and a bit more about the two of you.”

“Lurion’s a great place. It’s populated by other Ellons of different types, but we have a few Humans and Flor who live there. There are a lot of trees there and we’re starting to get the technology developed in Saepi due to a treaty. The central island used to be bigger in the past.”

“Your island got smaller? Tell me about it.”

“Remember how I mentioned Mariqua to you before?”

“Sure, why?”

“The island was half inhabited by them and since it became inhabited they were guarded by a creature called Leviathan,” Kenta began. “As they lived near the water and depended on it for nourishment and survival, the Leviathan provided for them in exchange for their loyalty. For a long time Mariqua were able to coexist with Leviathan until they grew interested in the world outside of the islands and away from the ocean. Without that focus on the sea, the importance of Leviathan was lost and the Sea-Serpent grew jealous.”

“What did it do next?”

“In a rage it killed many Mariqua who left and a rain began. Many said that the rain was a form of Leviathan’s tears, and that they were not tears of sadness, but ones of rage. As the rain fell it gradually grew more acidic, eroding away land and injuring some life. It began to spread across the island until the remaining Mariqua began to attack Leviathan. The Legend then states that the battle was so great that half the island sunk beneath the ocean and Leviathan disappeared. No one knows who won or lost, but just that both groups disappeared. My grandmother was among the Mariqua who were gone at the time and spared.”

For a few seconds there was silence until Tula gave off an impressed whistle. “Damn, that’s heavy. Did your grandmother have any family left behind?”

“Her brother and parents. Since then, she’s been the only one to stay on what remains of Lurion. Others have said that the memories are too painful and they want to forget.”

“I can understand,” Tula sighed. “You said your grandparents raised you, what about your parents?”

“My mom died a month after giving birth to me because of health complications and I never knew my dad. My grandpa said he left after my mom passed,” Kenta explained, a faint twinge of bitterness in his voice. As he spoke he looked directly into the flames before him. “What about you Tula?”

“My parents raised me and I never knew either set of my grandparents. I was an only child, my dad was a merchant and my mother stayed at home and watched me. We were able to live easily for a long time and never had any issues until my dad was robbed one day when I was eight, after that he got an infection from a stab wound.”

Tula stopped talking for a few moments. Kenta could tell by the tone of her voice and how she seemed to be wiping her eyes that she was bothered.

“Was he alright?”

Tula shook her head before responding. “He lived a few weeks but no one was able to save him. He died afterwards and my mom had a breakdown. She left the house before he was even buried and never came back. For awhile I lived alone until my aunt and her family took me in. They’re the ones who taught me about everything I know until I left.”



“And why did you leave?”

“It’s complicated, ” Tula replied. For a while, the somber mood lingered in the air before Tula tried to change the subject.

“What about you Kei? What’s your family life like?”

“I shall tell you another time. It is late and we should rise before it begins to get too hot,” Kei said before going to her tent. “I shall see you both tomorrow.”

“See you.” Tula left to her own tent. “Good night, you two.”

“Goodnight,” Kenta said to them both before going to his own tent.

With Kei gone, Kenta and Tula were left in silence for a time, neither one wanting to end the night on such a disappointing note. It took a moment before Kenta managed to change the subject.

“Tula, what can you tell me about Rynnade?”

“It’s bigger than Isten, the place we were just in, and it has an arena. People come from all over to train and fight there, besides that I heard there was a blacksmith around who specializes in weapons. If they can’t fix my swords maybe I can get a new pair.”

“Maybe then we can watch a fight or two before we move on. Who knows, we might pick up something good.”

“Yeah. Do you think we should go to bed?”

“Sure. There’ll be time to plan this all out more tomorrow. Good night, Tula.”

“Good night, Kenta.”

It didn’t take long after for the two to go to sleep.

Once they were fully rested, the group continued on the path to Rynnade, but along the way, they noticed a figure sprinting through the sand; It appeared to be running for its life.

Wondering who or what it could have been, Tula, Kenta, and Kei moved toward the figure. Once they were close enough, they realized it was a stranger who was wearing robes that obscured their body. It took a moment for the robed person to notice the trio's approach.

"Are you three with them?" asked the stranger in a hostile voice. The way they spoke it was difficult to tell if they were male or female. It was as if they were intentionally disguising their voice. "If so, I encourage you to go, you're wasting your time."

"We're not with anyone. We just saw you running," Tula said. "Is something the matter?"

"I am being followed by a band of thieves, they call themselves raiders," the person said. The stranger was so well covered that the only trait that one could tell about them was that they were fair skinned. Shadows obscured their face and their robes were so baggy that they hid their body shape. At the mention of raiders Tula seemed to tense up somewhat, Kenta recalled a vendor mentioning raiders once back in Isten.

"raiders, huh? We better get a move on. They usually travel in groups of five or more. They aren't pushovers either." Tula explained. "We better keep moving towards Rynnade. Whoever you are, it's best if you stay with us until we're there. If not, good luck to you."

“...I will go with you for the time being,” The stranger said. “If they believe in strength in numbers, I best follow suit. Call me Ria.”

“We’ll skip introductions until later. Come on, Ria.” Tula led the others towards the next city at a faster pace. Ria was keeping up with them as they began to run across the hot, shifting sand, but they noticed before long that several people riding horseback were approaching.

Kenta’s group took Ria with them and tried to leave, but they were followed by the horseback riders. At first it was assumed to be another group of travelers, but Ria had warned them that it was likely the group that had been pursuing her.

It wouldn’t be long before they arrived and with their speed they’d catch up to the four of them before they could escape to safety.

“We may as well stay where we are and prepare for an attack,” Kei said as she stopped running. She then looked at their newest acquaintance. “Ria, was it? Do you have any means to defend yourself?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Then stay nearby, we will protect you,” Kei said simply. Kenta was already getting Solan ready, and Tula had her swords, but it seemed that something was disturbing her.

“Are you nervous?” Kenta asked her.

Tula replied after a short pause. “I’ve had some experience with these people before, I’m not eager to meet them again. If I have to fight them though I’ll be ready, after all that’s my job now, right?”

“Yeah, and I know you can do it,” Kenta replied reassuringly. “After all, I’ve seen you in action.”

“Right, thanks,” Tula replied. Within minutes, the assortment of strangers arrived. Upon seeing them, Tula seemed to be relieved. Her former confidence returned, though Kenta wondered why.

Among them was one figure who carried a large blade, her face arrogant and somewhat condescending as she dismounted from her horse. She was tall and somewhat more muscular, with a weathered beauty to her. Aside from her were a few others on horseback, roguish men in black clothing with basic looking scimitars at their sides. The perceived foes gripped their weapons firmly before the one in center spoke.

“I’m not sure if you three are aware, but you have a fugitive with you. We only want her and we’ll go about our way.”

“Hold on. We should talk about this,” Tula said, stepping forward. She sheathed her blades and walked forward, exhibiting even more of her confidence than usual. The lead woman seemed to take notice of her.

“Why should we?”

“Because a raider’s first interest is coins, not conflict,” Tula said knowingly.

“Does this person owe you some sort of debt? Maybe we can discuss a way to resolve this peacefully.”

“No, we have our orders. I was asked to retrieve this person by our leader. The reward for bringing them in is more than substantial.”

“May I ask your name?”

“Lapis,” The woman said to Tula. “Why do you care?”

“Because I want to resolve this without any issues. How about we-” she began, when suddenly a large splash of water sprayed from the ground, washing over Tula, the r raiders, and Kenta and Kei.

The wave was so heavy that it knocked the riders off of their mounts. While they were stuck, sputtering on the ground Ria made a hasty retreat, leaving everyone confused. Looking at the ground there was now a hole that was sent water spouting upwards slowly.

Tula looked at it in wonder, while Lapis glared. Not only had her target escaped, but now her horse and her men’s horses were all running rampant, going off in separate directions.

“Damn it all! You wasted my time!” Lapis roared. Her men did not draw their own weapons, but looked ready to assist at any moment. “Stay away from us, and if I so much as see you around again I’ll make you regret it.”

With her threat made, Lapis went with her men after Ria on foot. At first Tula was about to follow, but Kei spoke out.

“Do not pursue. They most likely will not catch up now,” Kei said. “Ria is far faster than them and apparently has a great amount of endurance. I am impressed.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to let that Lapis girl off for threatening me. Next time, I guess,” Tula sighed before looking at Kenta. “That was pretty nice of you though, sticking up for a stranger.”

“I did?” Kenta asked, puzzled. Tula nodded at him in confirmation.

“Yeah, so was there an underwater reservoir or something that let you do that?” Tula asked as she pointed to a hole in the ground surrounded by a small puddle.

“That wasn’t me,” Kenta said.

“...What?”

“It wasn’t me,” Kenta repeated. “Someone else must have controlled that water.”

“You just said the other day only Mariqua could do it, right? Or was that a lie?”

the auburn haired desert dweller asked suspiciously.

“No. I was telling the truth. I think that Ria might be a Mariqua.”

“The odds of that being true are low.”

“But I saw her for myself. Besides, even if she isn’t, I want to know how exactly she can control water.”

“Yet going after her would not be prudent. We would have as much success as her pursuers. It is best if we carry on our path and avoid any more issues for the time being.” Kei advised.

After hearing her speak, Kenta thought it over and sighed.

“You’re probably right. We better move on for now,” Kenta said firmly.

“Fine. Let’s just get moving, then.”

Shortly after their encounter with the raiders and the mysterious Ria, Tula, and Kei continued their course. The remainder of the trip took two days and passed on without incident. While their movements were uneventful and filled with searing sand blowing in the wind, it also passed before they knew it. They arrived at Rynnade safely, just as the winds settled.

## CHAPTER 4

Rynnade was, in fact, much larger than Isten and more well-kept. It resembled the more modern cities Kenta had seen in his travels and developing around his home. Likely the city had been influenced and built up by many who had settled there on their travels.

As the trio walked, Kenta noticed a few Flor. Like most others of their kind, they had dark complexions, and bore green hair that was reminiscent of leaves. They were people who enjoyed the world about them; however these ones were hardier from life in the desert. They also had some form of plant growing from their head. In their case there was a small barrel shaped cactus coming from their heads, occasionally the cactus also had a small bloom on it.

“Wow, there are Flor all the way over here too?”

“Every now and again they come in, same for other races,” Tula informed him.

“This place is a hotspot. There’s plenty of water, tons of business, and entertainment.”

“Entertainment? Of what sort?” Kei asked. The bodyguard was trying to imagine what exactly could go on in such a town. “Are there performances of some sort?”

“Yes. There are a few performance halls, but I had some other place in mind for our visit.” Tula said, “Let’s find an inn and I’ll show you guys.”

Following her suggestion, the duo followed her and settled in at the inn before they followed Tula to the more central part of the city. As they travelled the somewhat congested road, they saw a multitude of people were headed towards a large, circular building. Kenta soon realized what it was.

“Is this the arena?”

“That’s right,” Tula told him as she continued to guide them in. “I visit here every so often to learn about fighting and catch a good show. The people who also run the arena also set up for wagers to be set, this is how I used to earn some extra money when funds were tight. I just want to come here to see how the place is for old time’s sake.”

“Tula, do warriors kill each other here?” Kenta inquired. Tula shrugged.

“It’s very rare, but it happens. Usually a fighter will admit defeat or a match will be called. It only keeps going if the fighters insist on a battle to the death,” she explained. “They stop since they can’t grow any stronger if they die, but some fighters have a lot of pride.”

“I understand the logic, but are you sure we’re going to see anything useful here?”

“Just trust me on this one. I have a good feeling we’ll see something useful here.”

Though Kenta was reluctant to keep going, Tula’s urgings won out in the end. Sighing, he went in with her, with Kei following closely behind.

Making their way past the main hall, they saw several things; one was a series of booths for those who wished to gamble on the victory of certain fighters, another was a hall that led to the battlefield’s gated entrance, then several sets of stairs leading to the



audience seats, and a small cluster of merchants who wanted to sell the people their wares.

Heading up the stairs and paying for seating, Kenta, Tula, and Kei soon joined the public in watching the goings on. They had a decent view of the action going down in the arena. Below there was a hulking man with a short beard and dark gray eyes. He stood tall and was well-muscled, his bare chest bearing scars. He was staring down his opponent who was far smaller.

The person was, in fact, a boy no older than seventeen. He was an Ellon, much like Kenta, with darker skin and much wilder hair. The Ellon's long, shaggy hair was a light brown, almost sandy color. Despite his smaller frame, he was somewhat muscular and had a wild-eyed expression. Unlike the older and taller combatant, he seemed to be absolutely brimming with excitement.

“For our next match, the duel shall be between Lazarus and Randall. The warriors have agreed to a match without weaponry. The last man able to stand is the victor,” the announcer said, his loud, booming voice going across the coliseum.

The people gave cheer as the combatants began. Kenta found himself enjoying the prospect of the fight. His excitement was palpable in the air as he watched the duo prepare to fight. One thing he liked about arena fights was that usually there was no malice or inherent anger coming from the fighters, just competitive spirit. They wanted to prove themselves and to grow stronger, he thought, in order to be what they perceived to be their best. With earnings from victories and the fans they gained, it wasn't a bad way to make a living so long as one was talented enough.

After a few moments, the announcer shouted again.

“BEGIN!”

With that, the fighters immediately engaged, the older of the two making the first move. He started with a solid swing from his right arm, putting power and precision behind the strike. The young Ellon was able to evade it; his race was known for their agility. Like Kenta he was some form of feline, but something about him was different. As the dark skinned pugilist dodged the attack, his opponent followed up with a powerful kick.

Watching the attack connect, Tula smirked.

“The older guy, Randall, he’s pretty strong. He’s supposedly been at this for the past twenty years,” Tula said. “Every match I’ve seen him in, usually he comes out on top.”

“Not this time,” said a female voice.

Looking over, Tula noticed a strange, fair skinned lady with somewhat pointed ears. The young woman’s her eyes light green and her hair matched, save a few violet strands. Dressed in a unique outfit that revealed her midriff and most of her legs, she stood out compared to the others.

“Excuse me?”

“I said Randall will lose. He’s definitely amazing and he knows how to handle himself, but he’s gotten old. Lazarus’ reflexes are sharp and he’s not as green as one might expect. The kid has a really good chance at winning.”

“You sure about that, Miss...?” Kenta asked. He noticed the woman smile coyly.

“Ana, and I’m positive. Lazarus has this one in the bag. I was willing to bet as much earlier.”

“How much exactly?” Tula asked. Her curiosity was piqued.

Kenta sighed in exasperation, while Kei continued to focus intently on the match.

“Tula, you aren’t about to gamble, are you?” Kenta asked.

“Maybe a little. Trust me there’s nothing wrong with an occasional friendly wager.”

“Right,” Ana said. “So then, I put down fifty Kres on Lazarus, will you take that bet? Just between the two of us?”

“Sure.” Tula placed down fifty Kres of her own. “This is gonna be sweet.”

“Yeah, for me,” Ana replied as they all resumed watching the match. By then, the fighters had exchanged more blows.

Lazarus had taken a few hits, but had given back many more. He was more lithe than his elder and more flexible. It was evidenced by the way he jumped around his opponent. His superior maneuverability also gave him the power to inflict heavier hits faster, such as one jumping kick to the side of Randall’s head. Of course, Lazarus’s speed did not give him impunity, as Randall knocked him aside with a fierce backhand. The hit sent Lazarus sprawling, but he rose up and came back with a solid punch to Randall’s face, followed by a headbutt. The crash of the Ellon’s cranium against the older man’s let out a dull thud that was inaudible to everyone else.

Randall struggled to stay up and fell on one knee, just in time for Lazarus to knock him out with a hard downward hammerfist. The strike ended the bout and earned him a victory.

“And Lazarus claims victory!”

After that a large, resounding cheer came from the stadium, followed by several groans, including one of Tula's.

"Damn it!" she roared. She continued to moan as she put her money in the space between herself and Ana. The teal haired woman smiled as she took it up.

"I told you he would win. The kid has talent," she said before rising. "Watch my seat please; I need to go collect the other half of my money."

As Ana walked out, Tula sighed and got out 100 Kres from her pocket, looking at the money in her hand with determination.

"You aren't going to bet again, are you?"

"Yeah, I am. That guy in there is good, but I think I could take him if I wanted. If I can just set up one more bet with Ana where he faces someone with skill, I can make my money back and then some."

"If you insist, but I think you should already know gambling isn't going to help you much," Kenta chided. The victor had caught his attention. The younger combatant seemed to be willing to go for more fights despite his damage. The more Kenta looked at him, the more he felt there was something familiar about this young man. Kei looked at Lazarus as well, but Tula merely huffed in annoyance.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Supportive," Tula replied sarcastically. "All I need is a sure thing..."

"Then bet on me." Kenta stood up and looked at her. "Are walk-in fighters accepted?"

"So long as they pay the entrance fee, yeah, but I don't think you can handle it," Tula said dismissively. Now it was Kenta's turn to give her an annoyed glance.

“You said you can take him and we were about equal when we fought before. I think I can handle it.”

“It won’t be a swordfight though. This’ll probably be a fistfight.”

“Kei’s taught me about hand to hand combat along with some of my other teachers. With or without a sword, I’ll do fine,” Kenta boasted, confident in his skills.

“From what I can see, Lazarus’ style is pretty rough.”

“Yeah, but have you ever been in an arena fight? It’s gonna be hard to keep up against trained fighters.”

“I’ll try. Besides I want to see how I stack up against this guy,” Kenta said as he handed Solan to Kei. “If this is going to be a hand to hand I won’t need Solan.”

“I will keep it safe,” Kei said simply. “Please, do not take your enemy lightly. He may not have trained as much as the others, but his strength is remarkable for one his age.”

“Taking an enemy lightly is one mistake I won’t repeat,” Kenta stated, giving a wink to Tula before he departed. He passed Ana as he went down, to which she gave a cheery hello, making Kenta give a slight smile.

## CHAPTER 5

Kenta eventually made his way down to the entry gate where a man was allowing others to pass; five warriors were in line, waiting for their match to come up. The man who seemed to keep the line looked at Kenta. He had long hair and had an air of levity about him.

“Hey, you here for a match, kid?” he asked looking Kenta over.

“Yeah, against Lazarus, though. I’m not much interested in the others.”

“Yeah, sorry. His next match isn’t slated until three fights from now. You can fight him then, but if you want that you need to get signed up to fight now. One of these guys needs a match up anyway, so I’ll put you down for the first one since you’re new here and then you can have the one against Lazarus.”

“Thank you.”

The wait only lasted a few more minutes before the man called Kenta and another person up. The fighter was young, probably a little older than Kenta. He was one of the

cacti type Flor that Kenta had seen earlier, dressed in slightly tattered and loose robes. His light green eyes met Kenta's as he offered him a hand.

"I suppose we'll be fighting soon. I look forward to the exercise."

"Likewise," Kenta said as he took his hand and shook it. "I am Kenta, and you are?"

"Call me Iseant. I promise to end this quickly."

"As will I." Kenta grinned cockily.

With their greetings exchanged, Kenta and Iseant both went to the field. Looking around, Kenta found Kei, Tula, and Ana in the crowd all watching intently. He gave them a brief wave before the announcer said it would be an unarmed match, like the previous one.

"Both combatants may begin!" he shouted suddenly. With that Kenta and Iseant both took their combat poses. A moment passed before Iseant came in to attack. His moves were graceful and deliberate, but Kenta could read them well. Coming in for a punch from the side, Kenta blocked it with his arm, only to feel sharp pain.

"Gah!" he cried. He was bleeding in several spots where needles were sticking out. He plucked them out before realizing what was his opponent was doing. "You can grow needles like a cactus."

"Among other things." Iseant said, "It is a natural talent of mine, not a weapon. If you like, you can surrender; otherwise you might be in for a prickly situation."

"I won't give up," Kenta said still as he tossed the needles aside. "I've got someone I need to meet in my next fight."

“Then I hope you can meet them in another way, because I won’t lose.” Iseant replied before growing one extremely large needle from his forearms, almost like a spike. Kenta realized he was at a disadvantage. If he was to try any direct attacks he’d be stabbed either by the enemy’s defense or offenses. If he had Solan, he was sure he’d win, but like this he had no definite way out. Looking at the ground he thought about the glochids, cacti thorns, he had discarded. Throwing them at Iseant might cause him to do some damage, but aside from not knowing if they were even aerodynamic, he also figured Iseant could evade them. For a time, Kenta continued to ponder his situation while he evaded Iseant’s attacks.

He came at the cat-eared Ellon, now stabbing even more rapidly him. As usual Kenta’s reflexes were sharp enough to enable him to dodge them, albeit narrowly. Without a steady way to counterattack, he was at a loss. He continued to jump, duck, and sidestep he felt the water in his canteen slosh about. That was when he had an idea.

Once Iseant had tried a downward stab, Kenta leapt back and spun the lid open. Once it was he drew the water out, surprising both his foe and the watchers as they saw the liquid float in the air, he took a few stray droplets and shot them directly at his foe, the projectiles stinging on contact. Smirking, Kenta realized he had found his answer.

Sending bigger waves now, Kenta continued to hit Iseant with a barrage, but he would need a more solid hit in order to win the fight. Condensing his remaining water into one massive ball, he sent the pressurized, fist sized burst towards his foe, only for the attack to miss.



Kenta nearly faltered as he watched it happen. The water hit the wall behind Iseant who sidestepped just in time, leaving Kenta almost without any water around him and a sizable, crack in the wall, residual water coating it.

Cursing his luck, Kenta pulled the small remains of water droplets off of Iseant, but it was barely enough for a small disc to form in his hand. Looking at his foe, Kenta knew he would need a bit of luck now.

Iseant, however, seemed confident as he strode in again, this time his annoyance at the small amounts of damage he suffered caused him to attack more fiercely. Upon attacking, Iseant managed to stab Kenta twice, once in the leg and again in his left shoulder. Neither was particularly deep, but both hurt enough to cause him to cry out in pain. Though he was suffering, he also saw an opening as he took the water and condensed it into a flat, almost bladelike wave. Swinging it down hard, he cut off one of the spikes and pulled it out.

Iseant gasped, but now Kenta had two weapons. The Flor had not expected the water to be weaponized in such a way. He tried to grow another spike, but he was too slow. With the severed spike in his sword wielding hand, Kenta stabbed Iseant in the shoulder and forced him down. Iseant could feel the spike at his throat afterwards, pressed against his skin.

“Give up!” Kenta grunted. He could feel the pressure of the needle tip threatening to puncture his enemy’s flesh. He was only going to wait two more seconds before he went on. To his relief Iseant raised his arms and retracted his needles.

“I surrender,” Iseant sighed dejectedly. With that Kenta relaxed while the audience cheered. As Kenta felt himself grow warm with pride and slight embarrassment,

he heard a loud whistle from the audience. It was a happy Tula cheering for him. Most likely, she had bet a fair amount of money on him winning. As Iseant bowed, Kenta did the same. “Good match.”

“Very. I never expected you to use water. I must say it’s rare to see someone with your skill in these dry, arid areas. I would not be against fighting you again.”

“Maybe someday. Just promise me it’ll be a friendly match up like this.”

“Yes, a friendly match without the two of us nearly stabbing one another’s throats,” the green-eyed young man added before taking his leave. “Good luck!”

“Thanks.” Kenta departed as well.

Kenta walked onwards towards to the resting area for the victors. Once he was there he saw Lazarus bandaging up some wounds he had received from the last fight. Now that he was close, Kenta was certain that he had seen Lazarus before. It wasn’t until he finished mending his wounds that Kenta approached him.

“You fought pretty well out there,” Kenta said to him, starting the conversation. Lazarus chuckled and looked at him.

“Thanks. I guess I could say you aren’t half bad yourself,” he said, holding out a bruised and calloused hand. “You have potential, but you need to use your mobility to your advantage. Considering whom you fought against last match, you could have ended it earlier if you used that water for a few faster hits rather than the hardest one you could manage.”

“I appreciate the advice. Someone I was sitting by was sure you were going to win your match, after watching I understood her confidence.”

“I’m flattered by you both. Can I ask what your name is?”

“Call me Kenta,” Kenta said. “You’re Lazarus, right?”

“You can call me Rus. I guess we’re supposed to be fighting soon. Don’t slack off on me, okay?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. After the match though what do you plan on doing?”

Kenta asked him. Rus thought for a second before replying.

“I’ll head off to the capitol and apply to become apprentice to one of the knights,” he said honestly. “Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.” The answer surprised Kenta; why would a fighter want to become a knight? Wouldn’t continuing his free path as an arena fighter be more fun? At such a young age, he already showed talent for it. Before Kenta could ask any more though the attendant from before came by.

“Your match is coming up you two. Be ready in ten minutes.”

“Got it,” Rus replied before flashing a fanged smile. “Good luck out there Kenta, you’ll need it.”

“Same to you,” Kenta laughed. “Say, after the match I’d like to talk to you a bit more.”

“I guess that’s fine. I’ll be waiting at the front once the crowd disperses.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kenta said, smirking as he and Rus went to the battlefield.