

# Playing with Fire

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On the eve of his next assignment, the berserk assassin Kellan Eagan walked to Zagalo's Forge near the south-western docks. Sep, an old friend, was the only blacksmith he trusted to fix his weapons properly. Walking past the shopfront and around the back, Kellan saw Sep feeding a stream of fire a foot wide from his gloved fist into the forge, his eyes glowing red. Kellan frowned. This flame was much too broad to be afforded by something like the baker overpricing his morning bread.

"Evening, Sep," Kellan said. The bear of a smith paused, his eyes fading back to brown, and wiped the sweat off his brow with a thick, tanned, hairy arm. "Asswipe McFuckface come back again?"

Sep turned his shaven head. "Ah, Kellan, good evening. No, I won't be needing your services. If he's rude again, he'll just get his daggers and gold back in a single lump."

"Oh, come on. One good—"

"No, thank you," Sep chuckled.

Kellan scowled. "You're no fun."

Sep's bushy black beard twisted into a slight smile as he rolled his eyes. "Here for your weapons?"

"Heading out tomorrow," said Kellan.

Sep nodded. "Another unsavoury merchant?"

Kellan shook his head. "Groth Ahrder. Diean gang leader. Trying to muscle his way into Atla. Good fighter, better escapee. Proof of death will be a signet ring he always wears. Unfortunately, Keith the Bandit also wants his boss's head in a month, so I'll need my reserves for that."

"Of course. Got enough stockpiled?" Sep had his objections about his friend's favoured tactic, but knew better than to talk him out of it.

Kellan grinned. "Should do by then. I'd bring back some souvenirs, but all the stonework will be too charred."

Sep grunted in acknowledgement as he led Kellan through the forge, into the shop and over to the counter at the back of the room. Racks of swords, spears and axes lined the walls, separated by stands displaying chain mail and plate armour. Sep bent down behind the counter to retrieve two slender cloth packages, one much shorter than the other. "I still don't understand how you got them so banged up, but they're good as new now." He peeled back the cloths to reveal slender twin swords with knuckle guards, enclosed in sheaths with straps for wearing over one's back, and a vicious-looking mace with a broad, solid handle.

Kellan drew one of the swords, revealing a slim blade that curved back in a hook at the tip. He re-sheathed it and slung both over his back, then tapped the mace's hilt. "And—"

"Steel, yes, I remembered." Sep took the mace and tossed it up in the air.

Kellan raised a hand as it stopped and began to fall, but made no effort to catch it. Instead, he watched it drop to eye level, tumbling back towards the counter. Just as anger fuelled fire, anticipation controlled metal, and Kellan tapped into his, his eyes glowing orange. The mace froze in mid-air. "Perfect. Thank you," Kellan said, hanging the mace on a belt hook by its looped pommel.

"You're welcome," said Sep. "And make sure to use it before you resort to—"

"Cheating, yes, I know," said Kellan. "Don't worry, I won't get myself killed."

Sep frowned. Stronger magic usually required greater intensity of emotion, but Kellan had found a risky loophole for that, and regularly abused it. "You'd better not. You're playing with fire there — *no* pun intended — when you don't have to. Even without cheating, you can still match me flame for flame."

Kellan shrugged. "Well yeah, people are shit. Just ask Asswipe McFuckface. Anyway, my shout at the Falling Barrel once I'm back, right?"

"I'll hold you to that, even if I have to go to Decay and demand he bring your stupid ass back from hell," said Sep, invoking the god of death. "And you'll have plenty of gold once you're paid, so no whining about ale prices, or I'll send you straight back."

Kellan laughed. "Shut up. See you in a few days."

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The next morning, Kellan rose and fed his horse, then set off for Temple Park. As a boy, the ring of ten pyramid-capped ziggurats devoted to the gods had been awe inspiring. He passed through the circle of columns that enclosed the scarlet and jet-black temple of Pleasure, which sat towards the southern extreme of the park, and approached the front wings that lined the path up to the main ziggurat. From this angle, the temple now just resembled a great dog laying on a garden bed.

After praying to Pleasure – he assassinated mostly out of enjoyment, not for the admittedly good pay, so it only felt right to pay tribute to the god of fun – he strolled along the paths through the middle of the park to the temple of Temperance, the northern-most of the temples. Entering its great hall, Kellan crossed the blue-flecked white stone floor to the statue of Temperance looming over worshippers from atop a dais across the back of the hall, passing a man and his elderly father leaving the temple, two families of seven and four, and a heavily pregnant woman sobbing into her hands. He stared at the statue for a moment, then closed his eyes and bowed his head in prayer. Kellan despised Temperants, but tight control over his magic was necessary for his particular tactics, so he supposed he ought to keep himself in the god of restraint's good graces.

"It's alright, she's in a better place," someone whispered from across the hall. Kellan looked over. Another woman had joined the pregnant one, and she seemed ready to burst into tears as well.

"No, she's not. She can't be," the pregnant woman hissed, glaring up at the newcomer.

"Because her magic killed her? Bacia—"

Bacia's eyes flickered purple, blazing with disgust. "Yes, because she let it! You know Temperance abhors those who die of excess."

"Bacia!" Her friend glanced up at the statue as if worried Temperance might damn her to hell for what she was about to say, then looked back at Bacia. "She's your sister."

Bacia closed her eyes and took a deep breath, fresh tears trickling down her cheeks. "I—I know. And I'm hurting so badly because she's gone. But . . . she died of her own magic – of sin! How else am I supposed to feel about that?"

Her friend opened her mouth, paused, then closed it again and said nothing.

Bacia buried her face in her hands again, then clasped them together before her forehead and whispered, "Temperance, have mercy on her soul. Please. *Please*."

Kellan decided he'd had enough of eavesdropping. She was just another magophobic Temperant buying into the delusion that humans could somehow steal magic from the gods, condemning her sister for getting killed by her suppressed magic yet following the same path without even realising it. (Like all good killers, he watched his prey's eyes for the barest flicker of colour betraying one's mood or magics.) Kellan glanced at her round belly, pitying the kid's shitty luck.

Walking back through the park, Kellan spotted a crowd gathered around two priests. Approaching them, he saw one was a dishevelled priest of Truth, eyes wide with madness, and the other an irate priest of Temperance.

"It's a curse, I tell you, a curse," the priest of Truth was saying. "Human magic wasn't ever to be bound to emotion. Truth, he spoke—"

"Blasphemy! You dishonour Temperance with your heresy!" said the Temperant.

"It's caged! Imprisoned!" insisted the other.

Kellan snorted. Sure, a cage that granted immense power made any sense.

Continuing on his way, he decided visit the temple of Decay, which was more or less on his way home. He didn't visit for himself, though, nor for Bacia. The poor kid didn't deserve its mother's fate. It certainly wasn't its fault Bacia was going to get them both killed.

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According to Keith the Bandit, Ahrder had taken over a fort at the edge of the hills to the north. After his prayers, Kellan fetched his horse and rode out, reaching the fort after several days. It sat atop the southernmost hill, a relatively short, lumpy mass with little hill-lets dotting its side and the hills' woods encircling it. Kellan continued along the road as it curved away from the fort and into the trees between another pair of hills, ignoring a side trail back to the fort. He continued around several more hills, before abandoning the road and circling back around. He worked his way back to the last hill before the fort and dismounted, tying his horse to a tree. She was used to his work by now, but better safe than sorry. It would be a long walk home if she bolted.

Kellan crept around the hill and through the trees until they became a ring of fresh stumps encircling the fort and its hill. Crouching in the shadows, he examined the walls. There had been gaps when he'd scouted the place a week ago, but they'd since been filled with crude wooden barricades. The rebuilt front gate was just visible under the archway of a small tower on his left, and he spied archers patrolling behind the parapets. He could sneak up to the wall if he timed it right, but scaling it undetected would be much harder. He could conjure an iron shield, but he didn't have the coordination to climb and guard effectively. If he shot iron spikes at them, they'd just duck or get shields. Kellan discarded several more ideas, but eventually and reluctantly settled on one that would work without blasting down the gate.

Kellan watched the archers, and when they were all looking away, he dashed to the wall, darting from one lumpy hill-let to the next, staying in their shadows and watching the archers before continuing. Reaching the wall, he raced along it to the gate. Upon closer inspection, the gate was just two sets of four tree trunks stripped bare and bound together with iron braces. Perfect. Now to get his magic flowing.

Drawing his swords, Kellan tossed them into the air, aiming both at a brace halfway up the gate. He waited for them to collide, then caught them with his magic as they tapped each other and the brace with a gentle *tink*, and summoned them back. Re-sheathing them, he magically gripped the braces and strained his ears, listening for any sign he'd been heard. Hearing nothing, Kellan began working fissures into the braces, separating one loop from the next while holding them all steady. He nearly lost his grip once, but his anticipation that the whole gate would come crashing down and expose him fed his magic and strengthened his grip, and he continued working. After several more minutes, he was ready.

Kellan levitated the gate forward, parting the logs to peer into the courtyard. Empty. Great, he'd have to track down Ahrder. He strode into the centre of the courtyard, spreading the logs in a circle, and started to spin them around himself. It took a few moments for an archer to notice him. The archer shouted, and a dozen more rushed to the parapets. They shot a volley of arrows at him, but the arrows thunked into the logs or slipped between them only to be swatted away. The archers fired and wasted another volley, and then another. When they all paused to draw again, Kellan hauled the logs onto their sides by one end as they spun, and released them. The logs shot through the air and silenced the archers' screams, shattering their chests and faces and knocking them off the wall. Some caught their legs and heels on the parapets and tumbled down to the base of the wall, while others landed in the trees.

As Kellan surveyed the wall-top, satisfied with his handiwork, a door slammed open and a dozen thugs and bandits poured into the courtyard. Kellan half-crouched, holding one hand before him and conjuring a tall iron shield. He held the other at his hip, generating short bolts of white-blue energy – what Kellan called his magnetic fire – between his fingertips.

One of the bandits charged at Kellan, brandishing an axe overhead. "Die, sorcerer," he shouted.

"Ha! As if!" Kellan caught the bandit's strike and bashed him with the shield. As the bandit staggered back, Kellan tossed the white-blue bolts at his face. The bandit screamed, then his axe slid from his grip, and he collapsed. Wisps of smoke floated up from his eye sockets.

Kellan conjured another set of bolts, his smile twisting into a wicked grin. "Who wants to die next?"

The thugs and bandits stared at their colleague's corpse. Then, as one, they charged, shouting obscenities at Kellan. Kellan threw another volley of white-blue bolts and charged back, bashing one bandit back and catching another by the stomach, shooting more bolts through his insides. Block, bash, bolts, repeat. Kellan fought off one thug only to slay the next until all lay dead before him. But when he counted them, one was missing.

"WHAT! did you do to my men?!"

Kellan looked up. A man had emerged from the fort, looking livid enough to make a priest of Temperance faint. Another cowered in the doorway, then fled. Kellan fell back into his crouch and glanced at the ugly signet ring on the newcomer's hand. Ahrder. Perfect.

"Those pathetic losers got in my way. I'd have killed that last one too if he hadn't run to fetch daddy."

Ahrder's eyes narrowed. "Their deaths mean nothing to you?"

"Nah, they're all maggots. You—"

"Maggots? You're dead, boy!"

Kellan laughed. "Try me."

Ahrder snarled, conjuring an arc of liquid and hurling it at Kellan, his eyes shining red and blue. Kellan threw another set of bolts, and brought his shield around as Ahrder produced his own. Neither attack landed. The bolts melted small dents into Ahrder's shield and dissipated, but the arc of liquid, rather than bounce cleanly off Kellan's shield or splash against it, ate away at it. Kellan scowled at a fresh slit on the edge of his shield. Without his fire, acid would be much more troublesome than a bunch of thugs, but he was surprised Ahrder hadn't produced more. Was his outrage just for show?

Ahrder answered by hurling a small wave of acid at him. Kellan brought both hands up, reinforcing his shield with more iron, and planted it on the ground to stop the acid burning his legs. The acid sizzled against the iron, devouring it. A small spray bounced off the edges, splashing the ground behind him. Ahrder ran to one side around the shield, but Kellan morphed it into position to block Ahrder's new line of attack. Ahrder ran back the other way, and Kellan morphed the shield back again.

"Too slow, old man."

"Then I'll just beat you down, scum!" Ahrder fired a jet of acid at Kellan's shield. Kellan blocked it, but after a moment, a droplet began seeping through the centre. Kellan conjured more iron, sealing the breach. Another droplet appeared here, then a small trickle started over there. Kellan plugged the holes up, but more appeared. He built his shield up further and further, plugging holes left and right, but Ahrder's assault began to force him back. He bristled with frustration but pushed it down – he wasn't supposed to waste his fire right now.

One of Kellan's toes began to sting, and he jumped back. The acid had carved a small gap under the shield. Kellan covered over it, then blocked several new holes that had tried to ambush him. He was glad that Ahrder apparently lacked the skill and presence of mind to throw acid streams around at his sides. Just plugging the holes right in front of him was difficult enough already.

"Surrender, scum!" Ahrder screamed. "Make this easier for both of us and just die already!"

"Take your own advice so I can go home," Kellan shot back.

Ahrder snarled. "I will avenge my men, you butcher!" Streams of acid burst through Kellan's shield. He scrambled to patch them up. One stream grazed his arm. Another stung his leg. He barred his teeth. If this kept up . . .

More leaks erupted. Kellan caught several before they could grow, but one spat right at his face. He dodged it, but something sizzled over his shoulder. He craned his neck to find the knuckle guard of one of his swords dissolving.

Fuck the next mission. This asshole needed to die now!

Kellan roared. Fire erupted in every direction, but he seized control of it, bending the manifestation of his suppressed rage to his will. He wrenched his iron shield out of the way and shoved his flames forward. The shield clattered aside and acid rushed at him only to burst into a corrosive cloud. Ahrder threw both hands up and extended his shield in a semi-dome. A wicked grin spread across Kellan's face. Too little, too late.

Kellan brought his hands together, curling them as if holding Ahrder's skull, and funnelled his flames into a concentrated torrent. Ahrder's shield glowed red, and then golden, seeping to the edges of the solid under-layer and spraying around Ahrder in a curtain of molten metal. Ahrder reinforced his shield as Kellan melted it away, but not fast enough. A moment later, it collapsed on top of him. Ahrder was dead before he clunked to the ground.

Kellan roared up at the sky, fire gushing from his mouth. He'd unleashed his reserves, so now he had to use them all up. After several minutes, he extinguished the jet and stumbled over to Ahrder, panting like he'd just run all the way from Atla. The molten iron had now cooled around Ahrder like a statue. The signet formed a visible lump on one finger, but it had fused with the iron. Kellan knelt and created a jet of magnetic fire between three fingers. Sparks showered the courtyard as he severed Ahrder's wrist. Keith wouldn't mind the hand still being attached, though he'd be pissed that Kellan had spent his pent-up fire. Oh well. He'd just have to make other arrangements.