



THE HOUR HAS COME TO SET THE WORLD ALIGHT.

Abiassa's people fall. Her Deliverers wait as Poired Dyrth marches unchecked through the Nine Kingdoms. He's taken the Embers of countless Accelerants. He's taken Zaethien and Hetaera, the mightiest cities of the Nine. He's taken the blood of the royal family. Now Dyrth is after Haegan's power—the Fierian's power. And after that, he wants the world.

But Dyrth will not take it unopposed. Battered and outnumbered, the remnant of the Nine forge new alliances, make friends of enemies, and prepare to stand against the last great press of evil. In faith, they wait. The Fierian will come.

While war rages without and within, Abiassa's people face their greatest need. But before the Fierian can fulfill his destiny, he has to defeat the enemy in his own mind.

1

NORTH OF KERRAL, NINE KINGDOMS

Darkness crouched heavily, ambushing them in the night. Tucking the moonlight behind a thick veil, clouds forbade the contingent from advancing across the plain at anything faster than a crawl, for fear of falling prey to an ambush. Yet survival required they travel at night over the open terrain, guided by the unfaithful moonlight and Sir Gwogh's urgent instructions. Following Colonel Marz Chauld single file, Thurigas' Tili guided his destrier, whose sharp black ears flicked in every direction, pinning against the black poll whenever one of the Jujak bringing up the rear drew too close. The colonel had sent four men—their fiercest, fastest—to scout ahead.

Which meant they were guarded by less than the fiercest and fastest. Temptation squirmed through Tili to wield, to draw the ample heat from the air and cast light ahead. Just for a second. Enough to catch the path and keep them safe.

Foolish. They would not be safe outside the night. Even a little light could cost them plenty, including their lives. But he was tired. His muscles ached from the last two days of riding from the Citadel, fleeing Poired's army.

The Southlands around him were scorched. Thousands dead, and those who yet lived had stumbled in a beaten daze toward the only sanctuary that once existed—Hetaera. Now even it lay as rubble beneath the boots of Poired.

Despite the hours that had passed, his thoughts were still anchored to that fateful day. To the boy who'd died in his arms, his blood soaking

into the leather of Tili's gauntlets. Into the mantle he now wore but had never anticipated nor wanted. Yet wants were of no consequence when the hope of the kingdom lay before a warrior.

"Tsst!"

At the signal, Tili drew up his horse. Heart backed into his throat, he listened around his pounding pulse. 'Twould not be the first time they'd stopped in fear of an imminent attack, only to have a wild dog cross their path.

But no . . . This time Tili could sense something in the air. Something that hadn't been there before.

"Form up on the steward!" came Chauld's shout.

In a crash of thudding hooves, grunts, and stirring dust, a circle of horses and well-muscled men drew around him. Annoyance plucked at Tili's pride—he'd been the commander of the Nivari in Ybienn. Second only to his father, King Thurig, he had been tasked with protecting, not being protected. By the flames, he knew not why Abiassa had chosen him for this venture. Nor did he dare question Her. 'Twould do no good. He'd tried already anyway.

As the dust settled, he strained to see the scorched land beyond his small contingent. What threat could be so terrible that it could survive this desolation?

But even as the question sprouted in his mind, he heard it: the steady rumble of distant hooves.

Tili closed his eyes, forced himself to shut out the darkness, the fear. To focus solely on what was coming. He reached beyond the thundering hooves and sensed only silence. A quiet unlike the peace he had known in Nivar, this silence hung heavy with the anticipation of violence.

Again he reached out and this time felt heat wakes, isolating the numbers. His alarm rose with the count. "Too many." His mutter was answered by the nicker of a destrier. "Twenty. Thirty. Perhaps more."

"Blazes," someone muttered.

Here Tili could wield the Flames without fear of reprimand or mockery—the desperate lands were beyond propriety. Beyond Citadel-sanctioned hierarchies. The Nine Kingdoms had crumbled beneath the oppression of Poired and Sirdar of Tharqnis. In the name of protection, more folk accepted the violence of wielding.

Is that this hour?

The approaching roar grew until, in thunder and swirling dust, the riders fell upon them. It seemed as hundreds, herding their tiny circle tighter and tighter, like a noose constricting a neck. Horses and warriors shifted nervously. Uncertainly.

Fear drenched the air, heating bodies and slowing reaction times. Tili gritted his teeth and tightened the leather reins in his hands. “Whoa,” he murmured when his destrier stamped a hoof.

“Halt! Declare yourselves!” Chauld shouted.

Dust and noise seemed to yield to the colonel’s command as the horde came to a halt, but Tili and his men remained packed in on all sides by bodies and beasts.

“Who speaks?” a gruff voice demanded from the darkness.

Thwap. Flap! Thwap! Thump.

At the strange noises, Tili tensed, expecting an arrow in his chest. But nothing came save a ripple of the air above his head, pulling only his gaze upward. A moment later, a dull glow spread over the faces of the twenty men and horses surrounding them. Eyes on the thick, black—yet not black—banners that unfurled above every third man, Tili felt the knot of tension in his chest loosen a fraction.

“Fool!” Chauld snapped. “You’ll alert—”

“Shielding,” Tili muttered, impressed at both the perfection of the illumination—clear within the small bubble surrounding them but stretching no farther than the outermost horse—and at the perfection of the military formation the riders held. His father had spoken of shielding, but Tili had never seen it in action. Those outside this bubble would see naught save the darkness the shielding mirrored.

The leader nodded with a grim smirk.

“General Negaer.”

“Steward Tili.” Negaer inclined his head, then motioned to his men. “We are at your service, sir.”

With a snap, the soldiers tossed open their cloaks, a move that flipped the black-as-night cloaks to an inspiring, glaring white.

“Pathfinders,” Tokar whispered in awe from behind.

Tili frowned. Haegan’s friend had come far in the short months he’d

trained with the Nivari and Jujak—Tili had even been rather grateful for his presence the last two days—but his mouth had yet to find discipline.

“What of Hetaera? Have you abandoned your post so quickly?” Chauld groused.

“Careful, *Colonel*.” Negaer glowered, no apparent love for the other officer. “Hetaera is lost.”

Though Tili had guessed it already, the news struck like a physical blow. The Citadel—lost. How many had died? How many still suffered under the cruel reign of that monster Poired?

Belatedly, Tili realized the general had turned his attention back to him. “Steward, if you continue on this path, you will encounter Sirdarians. It is my advice that you shift southeast—aim toward the Bay of Winds.”

“That’s more than a hundred leagues off course,” Chauld objected. “And the lands are peppered with mercenaries.”

Negaer ignored the colonel. “Whatever course you choose, ’twould be an honor to serve you, sir.”

Tili’s eyebrows rose, mirroring his surprise. “Serve me? Are ye not needed—”

“The Nine need a ruler.” And their legitimate ruler, Prince Haegan, was missing, supposedly having fled to Iteveria. “As with the shielding banners, we have means to protect and supply you, as well as the determination to see you safely to Vid.”

Tili glanced around at the twenty men. Did the general truly believe so few could make a difference?

“That is my responsibility, tasked to me by Sir Gwogh,” Chauld objected.

“Sir Gwogh.” Negaer sat straight, his visage unaffected despite the venom dripping from his words. “You are a reputable officer among the Nine armies, Colonel.” He motioned to the half-dozen Pathfinders flanking him. “My men speak highly of you. They say you are reasonable and well versed in the codes of warfare.”

The words held a placating tone, but there was thin undercurrent of challenge. It reminded Tili of the lectures Father had given, grooming him for the throne. And always, there came a smack at the end—whether literal or figurative, it stung the same.

Chest puffed, shoulders squared, Chauld took the bait of the supposed compliments.

“Tell me, Colonel,” Negaer said, the tone one of remonstrance now. A superior to a lesser. “What armies does Sir Gwogh command?”

Chauld drew back ever so slightly, apparently realizing the smack intended. Gwogh was an accelerant. He did not command the armies of the Nine.

The general seemed intent on making his point aloud. “I believe the accelerant’s authority is limited to the Ignatieri.” Negaer angled his head to the side, to the Pathfinder at his right hand. “Colonel Rhaemos, to whom do we answer?”

White cloak catching the pale blue glow of wielding, the much-younger colonel remained impassive, his face like granite hewn from the rocks of the Cold One’s Tooth. Though fewer than thirty cycles, the colonel had an eternity in his eyes. He’d seen much. Done more. “The Fire King.”

“We have no king,” Chauld growled, his anger evident.

“*Nay!*” Negaer’s response crackled through the night, his gaze scanning the gathered. He almost seemed bored. “We have a *king*, Colonel.” He nudged his mount closer to Chauld, the blaze in his eyes a stark contrast to his grim expression. “Uncrowned. Missing. But no less our king.”

Blanching, Chauld trembled, both in fury and aghast at his mistake. “I—”

“The general is right,” Tili said, intervening, unwilling to endure further humiliation of any fighting for Abiassa. “Ye have a king. And we ride to him”—he looked at Negaer—“not Vid. As Steward of the Nine in Haegan’s absence, I accept yer service and that of yer twenty.”

Chauld snorted. “What good is twenty except to get us spotted more quickly?”

The slightest hint of a smile broke through Negaer’s façade. He flicked a finger to Rhaemos. A whistle riffled the air.

Tili drew in a quiet breath as tiny bursts of light flickered in the distance. Fifty more. A hundred. The height and distance made it impossible to tell if the sentries were on hills or just very far away. They were all equidistant apart. A perimeter. No, a second perimeter, for around Tili and his men stood the twenty Pathfinders, their bearing hard and resolute.

Even before this display of shrewdness and might, Tili had known

better than to refuse the protection and experience of Negaer, the general who'd founded the elite Pathfinders, who could track as well as Nivari or Legiera, and fight better than any other soldier he'd met on the plains or mountains. "Whether twenty or fifty"—Tili's gaze again considered the farther-out sentries—"I welcome yer help, General."

Negaer seemed to relax. Another whistle went out and horses shifted. Even with the subtle glow of a touchstone, Tili almost didn't see the two Pathfinders who sidled up on their destriers and settled in as though they belonged there.

Blond hair streaked with gray, the general nudged his horse in front of Tili's. "It is an honor, Thurig as'Tili."

"I—" A yawn cut off Tili's words.

Speculative eyes considered him. "When did you last rest, my liege?" Negaer's smile bore both rue and concern.

"Rest is a luxury." In truth, Tili could not recall his last full sleep, though it had certainly been before the burden of the mantle found his shoulders. But he was not alone in bearing it. "All with me are tired," he said, not wanting the attention or worry. "We have grave concerns before us. Most have not slept—"

"Nay," muttered someone solemnly. Tokar. "Some *have* rested. He has not."

Negaer's gaze shifted behind Tili as he gave a nod. "That would explain how we so easily set upon your caravan."

Tili cursed himself. If he could not care for a contingent of ten, how was he to steward nine kingdoms? "I will rest when we are safe." He nodded. "We should move."

"Then we ride to safety," Negaer said, pulling his massive horse around as a long, low whistle tweetled.

A series of commands, which sounded like stiff wind or creaking reeds, sailed through the air. Touchstones doused. Flaps of the shielding banners thwapped closed. The line of horses advanced, chasing the fading light at a clip that belied the dead black.

Relief spread through Tili, drawing with it a large measure of exhaustion. He'd not allowed himself to sleep, knowing they were being hunted by Poired's army. Also with the knowledge, whether spoken or not, that Haegan had left his people and armies abandoned. Tili would not be that

man, would not close his eyes and do the same injustice to the people of the Nine.

He would make Father proud. Lead admirably. Assure Haegan had a throne to ascend to. Then Tili could return to Nivar, to his siblings and parents. To his own glorious, blessed bed.

The nicker of a horse drew him up—and only then did he realize his eyelids had closed. He adjusted in the saddle. Somewhere along the way, they had been joined by wagons, presumably carrying the provisions and gear Negaer had mentioned. Their rumble made Tili think of far-off thunder.

“My liege?” the Pathfinder escort on his left whispered in concern.

Anticipating the next question—are you well?—Tili cleared his throat. “How much farther?”

“Not much, my liege.”

Even as the words met his ears, Tili felt his destrier dip down. He leaned back to balance. They were riding down a steep slope into a shallow ravine.

Negaer called a halt and ordered them to set up camp.

“Is it safe here?” Chauld asked.

As if in answer, several light sources flared, dull but adequate. A small copse of trees huddled around them, sagging against the heat and wind. They seemed as exhausted as Tili—and as dehydrated. The whole of the kingdom was parched.

Tili dismounted. His knees threatened to buckle when his boots hit the ground hard, but he refused to yield to the aches in his thighs and back. There were many no longer alive, so he would be grateful for the pain of a hard journey. He reached for his bedroll.

“My liege.”

He shot a glare over his shoulder.

A Pathfinder inclined his head and motioned to his right. “You should rest by the fire.”

A bloom of hazy blue fire roared in a circle of stones. Tili’s heart pitched at the sight, frantic it would draw the enemy. But his groggy mind remembered the flicker of shielding banners. ’Twas fathomless that there could be so much illumination beneath the banners, yet pitch black beyond.

Still. He must talk with Negaer. Plan tomorrow's strategy. Discuss Haegan and plot their effort to locate and retrieve him. "I would speak with yer general," Tili said, shoving his bedroll under one arm. "There is much to tend to before we can close our eyes to the danger."

Where had Tokar gone? He searched the shapes around them. A cluster of men stood near the fire. He glanced beyond. Then behind. "Have ye—" When he shifted back to the front, Tili blinked.

The once-gangly youth who had fouled every match in the training yard at Nivar Hold, now stood shoulder to shoulder among the best of the men. When had that happened?

"My liege," the Pathfinder prompted. "This way."

Surprise spiraled through Tili at the cluster of tents that had sprung up off to the side, out of sight and earshot of the fire pit. When his guide held back the flap of the largest one, he saw a long table with a map already spread upon it. To the right of it sat a cot piled with soft pelts and pillows. Suddenly, the aches in his backside gnawed greedily at his will, longing for the comfort of rest.

Nay. Duties first.

Negaer strode into the tent and nodded at Tili, then approached the table. He was followed by Major Draorin, one of the men who had accompanied Tili out of Hetaera, and a Pathfinder with a steaming cup in hand.

"To ward off the aches." The general's smile was deep and inviting as he motioned to the cup. "Drink while we talk."

"What is it?" Warm drink on the belly might fast put Tili to sleep.

"Warmed cordi, sir," the Pathfinder said.

"Nay." Tili rubbed his brow. Warm *and* fermented? He'd be out in a blink. "I thank ye, I—"

"It's not fermented," the Pathfinder assured. "We have no use for such luxuries."

"You'll need its hardiness for our talk," Negaer prompted, planting himself on a bench inside the tent. "Come. Talk. As a keen steward, I know there is much on your mind."

Plying my will . . . ? To what end? Did they not serve the same throne and Abiassa? He accepted the cup and lowered himself onto a chest, grateful for the uncomfortable press of wood against his backside, keeping him awake. "Nice tent ye have." Again, he eyed the cot.

"Glad you like it, but 'tis yours while you are under our protection."

"I couldn't." Yet he could. In so many ways.

"No false humility here, my liege. 'Tis yours."

Tili considered the man, his blond-gray hair and weathered features. The hard lines had clearly been carved into him from years in the sun, from a life devoted to violence of action, but there was also a gentility, an honor behind those hazel eyes.

Beside him, Major Draorin stood respectfully and offered a subtle nod that somehow encouraged Tili. Though he'd met Draorin only two days prior, he had quickly understood his worth.

Tili gave a nod. "I thank ye." He tipped the cup to his mouth and the scent of spiced cordi swirled around his nostrils. Silky warmth slid down his throat and coiled through his chest and aching muscles. Soothing. Comforting.

He had no sooner finished the drink than the general was grinning. "Better?"

"Indeed." Tili licked his lips.

"'Tis not much," Negaer said, "but should suffice until more suitable provisions can be prepared."

"It will serve well enough for now." Tili fisted a hand over his mouth to hide the yawn stretching his jaw muscles. "Now, I would have us discuss the route and contingencies for locating the prince."

"But of course," Negaer said, sipping his own steaming cup.

A strange . . . headiness lilted through Tili's mind. Unfamiliar, a thwapping noise distracted him. Tent flaps? He glanced there and found them tied back. So what then?

Beyond the opening, a banner snapped. On its dark field, a raqine flared beneath the tri-tipped flame.

Beneath.

Ybienn beneath the crown. When had they had time to make such a thing? That the sigil of Ybienn should be subordinate to the Nine cloyed at him. Yet he saw in the design that it was not simply beneath. The wings of the raqine supported the flame. Supported the crown. Allies.

Tili raked a hand over his face and stifled a yawn, his limbs like lead. His eyelids drooped.

"I would beg your patience a little longer, my liege." Negaer indicated

where Rhaemos had entered with another map and spread it across the table.

As Tili struggled to his feet, Chauld stalked through the tent opening, followed by Tokar. Two Pathfinders took up positions behind their general and captain as the officers gathered around the map-strewn table. Strange. Though he had been ready to command his father's army in Nivar and Ybienn, here Tili felt like he did at six years old when he'd sneaked into his father's war council meeting. Like an intruder.

"We continue southeast toward the bay, just north of Caori's border, and bank northward into Vid before heading east," Negaer said. "Here, here"—he stabbed a finger at several red Xs on the parchment—"and here are Sirdarian strongholds."

"We must avoid them," Colonel Chauld said.

Annoyance played along Negaer's furrowed brow. The colonel's comment was more open dialogue than instruction—of course they must avoid the Sirdarians. Poired and Onerid would take too much pleasure in gutting their contingent. "Aye," Negaer finally growled. "Avoiding them brings us to the prince faster."

Negaer motioned to one of his men, who stepped out, and returned with another steaming cup, which he delivered to Tili. "My men know the terrain. Already we have scouted it and feel it best provides a path to success for this mission."

Considering the proffered cup, Tili knew he shouldn't—'twould be too warm going down, too soothing—when sleep already beckoned. Still, he accepted it. "General, I side with ye on this. Anything to bring us to Vid sooner."

"And to Haegan," Tokar spoke up, receiving a stiff glare from Negaer for having spoken out of turn.

Tili sipped, secretly relishing the heat that coaxed the pain from his muscles. The fight from his body. Exhaustion plied against his strength. Fighting the heady invitation to slumber, he planted his hands on the map and stared down at it.

Why was it so blasted hot? Heat radiated through night, the product of an unusually warm spring and the fact there were no nearby trees or springs. It made him long for Ybienn's cooler temperatures and lush vegetation. But then, in the last week or so, everything had made him

long for Ybienn—the contending had ended in a nightmarish attack by incipients . . .

Nagbe.

“I agree,” he forced himself to say. “Through . . .” What was the name of that place?

Crushed as the image of the broken body of a young boy lying on the table far below the Citadel filled his mind, Tili rubbed his forehead. Nagbe had been dealt a deathblow by General Onerid, Poired’s right hand. Ultimately, however, Tili had been responsible for the boy’s death. If only he’d failed the final test—which he technically never completed because they had been attacked on Mount Medric—and left the boy in the cave. If only he’d brought the ruby from the cave and not the boy as well, then Nagbe still would be alive.

The foolish thought drew him up straight. Or maybe that was the grief he avoided. The truth was, they would have all been slaughtered, along with everyone else in the Citadel. The boy would have died in the cave, alone, instead of in Tili’s arms.

He pointed. “The . . . thity.” Why was his tongue thick?

He blinked and Draorin stood over him. Tili drew back, startled at the stealth of the long-legged major. Then the great man tilted sideways.

The tent blurred into nothingness as a voice rumbled, “Good rest, Steward.”

FIERIAN

ABIASSA'S FIRE

BOOK THREE

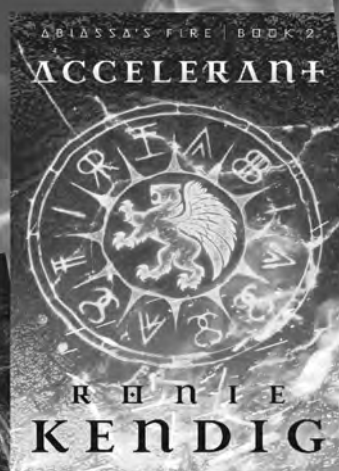
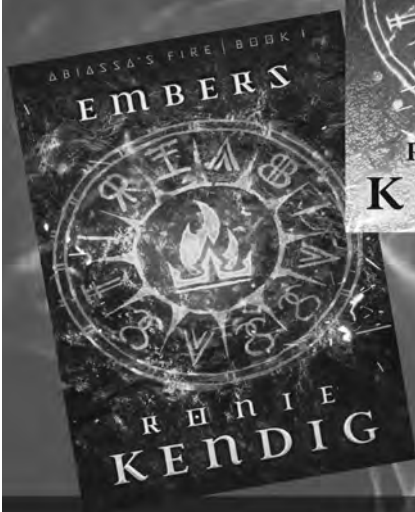
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Ronie Kendig is an award-winning, best-selling author. She lives on the East Coast with her family and a retired military working dog, VVolt N629. Ronie is the voice behind the *Rapid-Fire Fiction* blog. Her action-packed stories transcend genres and grip readers right from the first page. She is very active in the writing community, speaking to various groups, teaching at national conferences, and mentoring new writers.

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THE PEOPLE OF ABIASSA'S FIRE

House Celahar

Royal Family of the Nine Kingdoms

seat of power located at Fieri Keep in Zaethien, Seultrie

Zireli Celahar – (zī-rel'-ee) king of the Nine Kingdoms; the “Fire King”

Adroania Celahar – (ăd-rō-ăn-ya) queen of the Nine Kingdoms

Kaelyria Celahar – (kā'-leer-ee-uh) daughter of Zireli and Adroania

Haegan Celahar – (hā-gen) son of Zireli and Adroania

Zaelero Celahar – (zah-lěr-ō) Haegan's forebear; first Celahar to become Fire King; fought the Mad Queen and restored the Nine to the ways of Abiassa

Asykth Family

Northlands seat of power at Nivar Hold in Ybienn

Thurig Asykth – (thoo'-rig) king of the Northlands

Thurig Eriathiel – (air-ee-uh-thee-el) queen of the Northlands; wife to Thurig

Thurig as'Tili, “Tili” – (tīl-ee) eldest son of Thurig

Thurig as'Relig, “Relig” – (rěh'-lig) second eldest son of Thurig

Thurig as'Osmon, “Osmon” – (aws-man) youngest son of Thurig

Thurig Kiethiel, “Thiel” – (thē-ěł) youngest and only daughter of Thurig; love interest of Haegan Celahar; one of four companions Haegan joined on the journey to the Great Falls

Klome – (klōm) stable overseer

Aburas – (ah-boor-ahs) second in command of the Nivari, the Asykhian guard

Legier/Legier's Heart

Aaesh – a servant

Aselan – (a-seh-lon) cacique of Legier's Heart

Bardin – (bar-den) member of the Legiera

Byrin – (by-rin) right hand of the cacique; brother to Teelh

Carilla – (ka-rill-uh) worker in the cantina

Entwila – (en-twill-uh) one of three Ladies of the Heart

Hoeff – (hoff) giant who practices the herbal arts

Ingwait – (ing-wāt) matron of the Ladies of the Heart

Markoo – (mar-koo) member of the Legiera, quiet

Teelh – (teel-uh) member of the Legiera; brother to Byrin

Toeff – (toff) giant who works with the cacique

Wegna – (weg-nuh) – an Eildan reader

Tahscan Warriors

Vaqar Modia – leader; brother to Anithraenia, queen of Tahsca

Adassi – Vaqar's right hand

Dwaith – older member of the Tahscans

Jadrile – brother to Haandra

Haandra – sister to Jadrile

