

Burning Night

The flames seared, even at this distance. Kuran Belzheer leaped from the wagon and sped toward Sordwe Castle on foot, ignoring the heat. Burning oil wrinkled her nose, the stench so foul it forced itself down her throat as if she could taste it. What ought to have been a calm, pleasant night found itself alight in fire and choked in smoke.

“Kuran, stop!” Nisask, her twin brother, grabbed her by the arm. “Wait until we’ve quelled the flames. You can’t make it through.” She and her brother, in the company of an armed and ready escort, had come from their own country of Guinz. They’d arrived at Sordwe castle for a gala one day ahead of schedule, only to find it under siege.

The fire couldn’t threaten the stone structure directly, but it was doing a fine job at keeping them out. Arson, judging by the use of oil. Whoever started the blaze had to be inside, and who knew how much farther ahead they were?

“There’s no time for that!” She yanked out of his grip and grabbed climbing gear from a nearby wagon. “Give me some water bombs.” Thenem, her betrothed, and his parents were trapped inside the castle, prey to the unknown assailants.

Nisask opened his mouth to argue, but yielded when she started forward again without waiting. He tossed her three of the walnut-sized orbs. “Make sure you stand back or they’ll blast you too.”

She nodded thanks and made for the flames, lobbing the first one. It struck the ground in the center of the fire and exploded into liquid and foam, choking the inferno and smothering the oil it consumed as fuel. Already the anxious flames on either side moved in to close the gap. Kuran dashed through, ducking as they licked at her dark blue and maroon clothes.

Her cloak caught fire. She dove through to the other side and rolled, shedding what was left of it. Patches of burnt skin showed where the fire managed to eat away at her sleeves and leggings.

“Dorousoki!”

She turned at the use of her Guinzey royal title. Five guards had followed her through the burning barrier.

“We are with you, Dorousoki.” The leader saluted her.

Kuran tried to thank him, but clutched at her throat and coughed. She waved away his offer for help and motioned up the wall before finding her voice. “I’m fine. Scale the outside of the castle, we don’t have time to force our way in.”

She and the guards stabbed the wheeled climbing-grips into the stone, latched themselves on with the support harnesses, and pulled the triggers. The bearing gears inside the grips turned, and up they went, faster than it would take to climb a flight of stairs, but slower than she liked. Below, the heat from the flames fell away, leaving them with the stench of smoke, oil, and foam as Nisask and his engineers battled to gain entry.

Kuran pulled herself up to Thenem’s balcony. The fire raged inside, too. Was she too late? Was he already...? As second in line to rule, he’d have been ordered to hide somewhere.

The guards climbed up behind her, but she held up a hand. “Go protect the rulers. I’ll handle this.”

They nodded and ascended.

Once she opened the balcony doors, the heat and smoke would burst out, slamming into her. She ducked and hurled a throwing knife at the glass. It shattered, and she followed up with another water bomb, shielding her face and holding her breath.

Vapor ransacked her lungs despite her efforts, and mist clouded her vision for several seconds. When her breath and vision returned, she dashed in and scanned the room—ashes from the burnt drapery, rips and soot on the torn carpet, furniture overturned and demolished.

“Thenem? Are you in here?” Someone had trashed the place. Fear squeezed the leftover vapor from her insides.

A brush of air from above and to her left warned her to roll as a bowgun dart sailed past and stuck into the floor where she’d been standing an instant before. She looked up in time to see a cloaked figure scamper into the shadowed area of the rafters.

Still here? Thenem must be hiding nearby then. “Thenem, if you can hear me, stay hidden.” She waited, but no more darts sped her way. The assassin was waiting until he could get behind her. He had time on his side, as the flames made their way across the floor and over the walls.

She hurled a few throwing daggers into random rafters. Several plunks of metal on wood, no stabs to indicate a hit. And no movement. Luring him out might be the only way. Taking a guess at Thenem’s hiding place, she moved for it, slow and alert. She’d rather lead the killer away, but that would put him between her and Thenem where she couldn’t shield him.

No attack, even now. Fear rose again. Had he already killed Thenem and been on his way out? Focus. She had to believe he was still alive. Alive and scared. The thought of his terror made her quiver, made her want to rush to her betrothed and throw her arms around him.

Whistling air, but from which direction? She’d dropped her guard and hadn’t been listening! A blind roll to her right saved her neck from the dart, which settled for scraping her shoulder on its way by. Judging from its trajectory....

She whirled and threw another dagger. Down came the assassin, flushed out of hiding at last and forced to face her head-on. Now she had him.

While the man stepped away and reloaded his bowgun, she pushed slowly and deliberately to her feet, glaring smolders at him. With practiced reserve, she pulled her blade Roaring Liger from its scabbard on her hip. The sword gave life to its name, the mechanics hidden within the pommel snarling and howling as it emerged.

A scare tactic, and it worked. The assailant jumped, startled by the noise. She took advantage of the pause and hurtled forward. He fumbled the reload and tossed the bowgun down in favor of a long sword, clumsily parrying her strike and falling back.

The flames danced around them, glimmering in Roaring Liger's reflection as she brandished it, swinging from the side, curving up from below, whirling to build momentum and thrusting forward. Each time the assailant barely managed to save himself, thrown ever more off balance by the blade's savage din. She stabbed his rib cage, sliced across his throat, and the fiery dance concluded. The assassin dropped to the floor, lifeless.

Shuffling from behind made her turn, sword ready. Another figure emerged from a hidden alcove in the corner. A young boy no older than eleven.

"Thenem!" She ran to him and pulled him against her. "I'm so happy you're all right."

Ten years her junior, their engagement came about in the name of political convenience. But that hadn't stopped Thenem from endearing himself to her in the time they'd been acquainted. She was glad to have him as a friend.

He gripped her tightly, small body shaking. "My parents."

"I sent guards ahead to protect them. Are you hurt?"

Thenem shook his head. Kuran straightened and took him by the hand, leading him to the balcony.

A glint from above was all the warning she had to shove Thenem down and cover him with her body. Something clicked, and a bowgun dart sailed down, burying itself squarely in her shoulder. She dropped to the floor as a shriek of pain loosed itself.

Thenem reached up to pull it out, but she stopped him. “I’ll just bleed faster. Run for the balcony.”

“But—”

“Go!”

He cast her a worried look but obeyed. Kuran climbed to her feet and kept herself between him and where she assumed the second assassin to be hiding. A flick of movement gave the exact location away. She reached to her side to retrieve a throwing dagger, but came up empty.

The assailant would reload in a second, and she had nothing to—wait, she still had one water bomb left. Would that work? It would have to.

Thenem had reached the balcony. Only place left to go was down. The room blazed with reds and yellows, and the floor began to sink. It could collapse any minute.

Kuran clutched the water bomb, all focus on the rafters above.

There, an arm holding a bowgun!

She hurled the bomb, dashing toward a wall and kicking up and off it. With her uninjured arm, she gripped a beam and swung up. The assassin hadn’t been ready for the bomb and caught the blast at point-blank, stumbling but keeping his balance. Kuran charged him, sweeping his legs with Roaring Liger, cutting the left one open and sending him tumbling to the floor.

He fired reflexively as he fell, the dart slicing her calf and bringing her down with him. She rolled on impact, raised her blade, and plunged it into the man’s chest.

A chunk of wood crashed down a few feet away. The ceiling was caving. Kuran forced herself into a run, made it to the balcony, and grabbed Thenem. “Hold on as tight as you can!”

The climbing-grips sat lodged on the balustrade where she'd left them. She'd need both to hold her and Thenem's combined weight, and for that she needed both arms. Gritting her teeth, she yanked out the dart in her shoulder. Thankfully, Thenem had the good sense to press against the wound to stifle the bleeding.

She took hold of the grips and lowered them down the wall. The balcony caught fire above, and she felt Thenem bury his face against her to avoid looking.

When they reached ground level, the barrier fire was gone, defeated by the engineers. Most of the guards were absent, probably already in the castle. Nisask rushed to her side and put her good arm over his shoulder, supporting her as he led her to a medical bed.

The world appeared dimmer, and her breath came in gasps. Nisask whispered reassurances, but his voice seemed far away. She managed to ask after Thenem's mother and father and received a smile. Safe.

Relief washed over her as he worked on her wounds. Thenem went to find them and returned a few minutes later, his face more at ease. He stayed with her and held her hands while Nisask doctored the wound and her burns.

"We were belucked this time," her brother said. "Had we not arrived early, we'd be having a funeral rather than a gala. And you need to be more careful. We are *Korausoki* and *Dorousoki* of Guinz. Our safety is just as important."

"I'll see if I can't beg a handicap from the next assassin, shall I?"

He smirked back. "Couldn't hurt to ask, I suppose."

She laughed outright and sat up as he finished dressing the shoulder wound. Any damage to Sordwe Castle could be rebuilt. Lives couldn't. The three exchanged caring looks. Blessed be, nothing precious had been lost tonight.