

## Chapter 27

“What the heck is going on up there?!”

Tessandra raised her eyes, trying to see through the dust, the rain, and the blinding lightning bolts that shook the already dark skies above. For a while now, they had been hearing a terrible ruckus continuously coming from the castle, and from what she could see, most of it was that annoying Red Dragon’s doing. The red silhouette could easily be spotted on the higher towers, climbing up them like an oversized snake, its growls regularly reaching them.

She grunted and swung her sword to get rid of a couple of soldiers that were coming at them. Back to back with Sabael, they were still acting like an unstoppable duo. Luckily, he was still in a good enough shape to keep fighting and defend his position without too much trouble.

“If my memory’s right, that stupid teenage dragon just blew open the banquet hall! ...At least we know where the King and Cessi are!” she shouted back to him.

“Will they be able to handle that?” asked Sabael behind her, still looking worried.

Tessandra scoffed, and got rid of the blood on her sword.

“This isn’t Cessi’s first time dealing with a dragon,” she said. “As long as she and the King stay together, it should be fine.”

“Wasn’t His Majesty injured?!”

“That’s what I said, she’ll cover his ass!”

Although she was hoping that was the case, they had no way of finding out how things were going in the castle; the entire way to the gates was blocked by countless fights. The streets were crowded with both citizens

and Yekara fighters or mercenaries. It was easy to see which side each was on; while the Yekara and their allies were fighting with proper weapons and sharp skills, the townspeople were literally handling pitchforks, kitchen knives... actually, anything that could stab, cut, or knock out someone.

Tessandra avoided another swinging shovel when she moved to the streets, trying to find a spot where she could observe their surroundings more clearly. They had lost sight of the Cheshi allies, but they could see them appearing from time to time to help the citizens take out the Yekara. This was one of the messiest battlefields she had ever been on, but at the very least, she was almost sure they had the upper hand. Despite their lack of skill, the citizens that had gathered were just too big in numbers for the Yekara to properly fight. Every time they tried to face someone, three more citizens would come from behind to knock them out or hinder them in some way. Tessandra had even had her own one-on-one fights taken over this way, and now, she was just fine swinging her sword and trying to make her way out the best she could without injuring innocents. It also meant there weren't any killings on either side, as the Yekara barely got to do any damage, and the citizens were more focused on defending themselves too. They were even somewhat serving the fighters to her, one by one, or to anyone with fighting skills, so either the Cheshi, the Royal Guards still on their side, or Tessandra herself would give the finishing blow. Still, this wouldn't be enough. She had to know what was going on throughout the Capital.

With Sabael following tightly behind, she did her best to break away from the fights and climb up a roof to check out the situation. The fighting had mostly overtaken the handful of large places in the Capital that had the space for it; all the other streets were mostly deserted, except for people running from one place to another, or attempting to flee the surrounding chaos. She glanced toward the sea shore; Naptunie had lit the last fire a while ago, and there was nothing else to add. She could spot the dragons easily defending each one of their bridges, and happily getting rid of all the mercenaries and Yekara people trying to cross them; it looked like both dragons were having a lot of fun and absolutely no trouble at all. She

wasn't worried for Darsan either. He was probably having tons of fun on his bridge with plenty of people to brawl against. No, Tessandra was more concerned about Kassian and that woman, Bastat. They were in the middle of the largest battlefield, the edge of the island that was the Capital, trying to organize the chaotic troops however they could to minimize the losses.

"How bad is it?" asked Sabael, as she came down. "Did you see my sister?"

"Nope, no trace of Nana, but that's for the better... This is the most chaotic battle I've ever seen, Sab. The citizens are trying to defend their homes, but not all the fights are evolving. We can't simply kill all those bastards one after another, it's going to take ages, and I want to get to the castle!"

"Same," he sighed. "I don't feel too good about leaving the Princess and His Majesty on their own when the Yekara have taken control of the place. ...Can't we get one of the dragons there?"

"If we do, we will leave one more bridge unattended, and from what I've seen, I would not recommend that! Plus, you've seen their sizes! Even just Kian would literally wreck any street he steps in!"

"So what do we do?" sighed Sabael, glancing around at the chaos surrounding them. "We need to stop the fights here and get to the castle! I am not fond of the Yekara, but I can't help but believe we need to capture them, not kill them! Not only them, but all the Royal Guards too!"

"And those mercenaries," muttered Tessandra.

She was thinking along those lines. As much as she loved a good fight, this Kingdom was already on its knees long before this. The streets were full of citizens, and each family was doing their own thing to survive. Tessandra couldn't help but remember her cousin's concern, even toward those mercenaries. She would hate to see that much blood shed. There had to be a way it could be stopped.

"...Sab, those people are sticking to their spots, right? They probably got orders before the fight."

“Yeah, the Yekara have always been military. They stick to their orders until death if they need to. Between us Royal Guards, we always joke that they need their superior’s brain to think for them...”

“So if we found a way to have them stop fighting or make them believe they don’t have a reason to fight anymore, it could work, right? What would make them move?”

Sabael frowned and raised his sword to counter another attack coming from a soldier. As soon as they had gotten to the end of the building, they found themselves stuck in the crowd again, surrounded by shouts and strikes coming from all directions. At this rate, it would be hard to even regain control of the crowd, they were risking a mass riot...

“Let’s force them to move,” he suddenly said.

“What? How?”

“Their main residence! The Yekara Clan’s residence has been guarded like a fortress forever. That’s where they stock everything, including their weapons, and they’ve never opened it. I heard some of their people enrolled in the Royal Guard talking before, it’s like a whole military camp in there!”

“...So if we get in trouble over there, you think they’ll run to save their home?”

“Worth a shot.”

Tessandra frowned. It was a bit unethical, but from where she stood, she couldn’t really say they’d be the worst of the two. In fact, some other houses had been raided before, and for the entirety of the previous night, the other citizens had been subjected to forced searches and violent threats. The more she thought about Sabael’s idea, the more she felt like it sounded right. All those soldiers were there because of their deep loyalty to their clan. If they thought something had happened at their main residence, they’d probably flock there regardless of the orders they got.

“...I like your idea, handsome. Where is it?”

“A few streets away from here, northeast!”

So they would also get closer to Kassian and Bastat’s position. Tessandra glanced at the castle. She wished she was able to help her cousin, but right now, she was probably much more useful on the ground, among the other soldiers... She glared once more at the Red Dragon, climbing up the towers.

“Cessi, don’t be too kind, girl. You better not let that bitch get away again...”

“Tessa? Are we going?”

Tessandra nodded and joined Sabael. He ran ahead of her, guiding her through the streets. It was remarkably easy to get away from the crowd they had been with; Tessandra’s shiny green armor could be seen from far away, and by now, the locals knew she was on their side. They kept fighting every time they found a Yekara soldier on the way, or a Royal Guard who had betrayed his uniform; Sabael was the maddest at those. As someone incredibly proud of his duty, he was furious at all those who had turned their backs on the King. They had just killed another duo of them when he furiously kicked one of those guys out of the road.

“Hey, easy, love,” said Tessandra with a sigh, quickly cleaning the blood off her weapon.

“Sorry, it’s just... so many people fight every year to become a Royal Guard! It’s one of the most coveted positions in the Kingdom. The pay is good, and many people desperately need that kind of salary. We all had to go through a very tough selection and defy the odds to get there. I trained with these guys. But... when I see how easily those bastards betrayed the Kingdom for even more money, when we are trained to protect it, it makes me mad. Even if a lot were in it for the money, I still thought they were good guys, loyal. For fuck’s sake, we’re supposed to protect the citizens of this Kingdom! ...Yet I saw guys wearing the same uniform as I do forcing themselves into houses, robbing their neighbors, and... and they spent half the night ransacking the castle and fucking beating us...”

Tessandra suddenly realized how furious he really was. Unlike her rather vocal self, Sabael was one to keep his emotions to himself and rarely showed what he felt. She had already understood that, but after finally reuniting with him that morning, she hadn't realized how long of a night it had been for him. They had been separated, and after getting beaten up and captured, he had escaped an execution only to be thrown right back into fighting. He hadn't gotten rest, and half of the people who had put him through hell overnight wore the same uniform as him. Well, he had most of his clothes ripped apart, so there was a clear difference, but still... his fists were clenched around his sword's handle and trembling. Because his injuries were mostly alright, it didn't mean Sabael was feeling the same inside. She was a bit annoyed at herself for being so blind. Cessilia was the empathetic one, while she easily missed these kinds of things... She sighed and put her sword aside to walk up to him.

Sabael, who had been ready to keep going, was taken aback when she suddenly came up to him, and put her hands on his cheeks.

"Look at me. You've had a long night, Sab," she said softly. "I understand. But you need to focus, and cool down a bit, love. Don't worry, I promise you all those bastards will pay in due time for their betrayal. And once this is all over, your King will make sure the next recruits are truly loyal. I'm sure you're in for a hell of a promotion too."

Tessandra's cool eyes finally got to him. Sabael realized how heavily he was breathing, and gradually calmed down. It was his first moment to catch a break after all that... He sighed and slowly nodded. Tessandra smiled and put a quick kiss on his lips, making him chuckle and put a hand on her lower back.

"We got time for this?" he chuckled.

"We got all the time you need," she retorted very seriously. "Sab, I'm hot-headed, but even I know that if you stay that mad, you're going to make mistakes. I don't even care if we fry those bastards, but I don't want to see you get hurt. You've got enough parts of your body injured already and I am not liking my handsome being damaged. Also, only I am allowed to touch and stitch you up. Got it?"

“Ah, I was worried you were getting soft. Now that’s my girl,” he smiled.

“Yeah, exactly.”

He put another kiss on her lips, making Tessandra smile. Now he seemed much calmer.

“As much as I love this, I’m pretty sure we don’t have the time to get any naughtier. Ready to throw a party at those bastards’ residence, dragon style?” she smirked.

“Let’s get going.”

They resumed running, one behind the other, gradually meeting more hindrances on the way. It was clear the Yekara fighters were pouring out from the main residence, unlike the mercenaries they had paid to assist them. Sabael and Tessandra had to stay together and keep forcing their way to the main residence, sometimes deciding to hide when a larger group appeared on the way.

They took a new turn, and Sabael grabbed her to hide in between two houses when another group passed by without noticing them.

“Heck, how many are there...?” groaned Tessandra.

“More than I thought,” admitted Sabael. “My best guess is they got more people that were outside to be in the Capital for this. I’m also pretty sure some of those were definitely not Yekara until recently...”

“So what, they got more people to join the clan?”

“That would be a good way to recruit without being noticed. Many people are desperate for a bigger tribe’s protection, and if they had papers as Yekara people, it would have been easy to sneak them inside the Capital too. You recruit people from the desperate neighborhoods outside, promise them food and a roof as long as they promise to fight for your clan’s sake. I bet many would be willing to agree to that rather than keep struggling outside the Outer Wall...”

“Cessi was right,” sighed Tessandra. “This Kingdom really needs a lot of changes...”

“I’m sure she and the King will get to that as soon as we’re done here. Come on, let’s get–Fuck!”

Tessandra turned her head to see what had suddenly made him mad, and she gasped.

Another group of men were coming from an opposite street and entering the large residence, but they weren’t alone. Tightly bound by a large rope and her mouth gagged, she clearly recognized Nana.

“Shit! What the fuck were those bloody Cheshi doing?!”

“I wouldn’t blame them,” sighed Sabael. “I bet my sister couldn’t sit still and tried to help anyway...”

“Why did they capture her?!”

“They probably saw her lighting those fires, they know she’s working with us. They might try to use her as a hostage, maybe?”

“Oh, fuck no,” groaned Tessandra. “I swear if they touch a hair on Nana’s head, I’m going to fucking unleash hell on those damn bastards.”

“I’m going to have to agree with that...”

Sabael looked worried for his little sister. They remained hidden a few seconds longer, watching Naptunie get taken inside. Tessandra had planned to just set fire to the building, but with Naptunie in there, it would be hard, they had to extract her first. She tried to analyze the building. It was a fortress indeed: high stone walls with a tower at each end, and even the gates were heavily guarded. From what she could evaluate, the fortress was at least six or seven times the size of any house they had seen, perhaps more.

“We need to get Nana out, and quickly,” she muttered. “...Any idea how to get in there?”

“I could pretend to be one of them?”

“Sab, everybody saw your face in that plaza, none of them will believe that. Chances are at least one of those bastards will recognize you... I’d be of the opinion to barge in, but if they use Naptunie as hostage, it’s not

worth it. I have no idea of the layout of that place, they might kill her before I even get to her. Damn it, I should have just jumped out as soon as we saw her...”

“They could have used her as a hostage all the same... Frankly, I’m surprised my sister got caught. She’s smart, if she wanted to flee, she wouldn’t have been caught so easily!”

“No time for that, Sab, we have to go in... Should we split up? You distract them and I climb up the side? They won’t think of you as much of a threat compared to me, no offense. That could leave me the time to climb over, grab Nana, and get out of there.”

“That could work, but like you said, you have no idea how it is inside!”

“Damn it... If only we had a dragon here,” groaned Tessandra. “We could have a view from the top!”

“Let’s just go with your plan,” Sabael shook his head. “I don’t like leaving my sis in there any longer, so let’s—”

Before he finished his sentence, a huge explosion blew out behind them. Both ran out of their hiding place, their eyes on the vivid column of fire coming from the Yekara residence. Their people were pouring out, many of them screaming or shouting in utter panic, but Tessandra was most shocked by the fire itself. It was a bright blue color.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Tessa! Sabael!”

To their own surprise, they suddenly spotted Naptunie herself, running out of the crowd, her dress a bit burnt but the rope and her gag gone. She looked out of breath, with soot on her face and one of her buns undone.

“Nana, what the heck?!” exclaimed Tessandra.

“I did it!” she said proudly. “I did it! I-I told the Cheshi that were with me about the plan, and they agreed to help me out! I knew that if I managed to get inside the Yekara residence, I could trigger an explosion that would drive them out and cause panic in their ranks! I know you told me not to,

but the second I realized their residence was made of the same type of stone I used to—”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” exclaimed Tessandra. “Have you gone mad? You could have blown yourself up with them! Nana, what the hell were you thinking?!”

“I-I just wanted to help,” muttered Nana, suddenly vexed. “I couldn’t just stand on the side when I knew I could help!”

“...Told you,” sighed her older brother.

Tessandra’s eyes went back to the huge fire behind her. It was even more mind-blowing to see the culprit’s small silhouette against the raging fire behind them. She sighed.

“Oh, Nana. I’m starting to think you and Darsan really are one hell of a dangerous match...”

“M-me and Prince Darsan?” Nana blushed.

“Yeah. Your destructive power is quite a match, at least,” scoffed Tessandra.

“B-but I did a useful thing, right? This way, we can push the odds toward our side and get their attention away from the castle!”

“We came with the exact same idea, only you beat us to it... At least we got what we wanted.”

Things were indeed getting a lot more heated where they stood. The three of them were almost standing in plain sight, but their enemies didn’t even have the luxury to bother with their presence. The Yekara were, just as they had predicted, completely thrown off by their main residence being attacked. Many were running inside or out, trying to save some of their belongings, while others were trying to find ways to tame the blue wildfire created by Naptunie. In fact, they might even have been more scared by the impossible colors of this fire, which kept burning despite the rain. Not only that, but several smaller explosions were following at irregular paces,

the fire probably finding its way through the building for more things to combust... Sabael sighed.

“I’m thinking that’s your influence doing scary things to my little sister,” he whispered to Tessandra.

“Don’t blame it on me, I don’t push such ideas onto our Nana!”

“I just wanted to help!” insisted Naptunie, visibly getting embarrassed. “It’s not that complicated either, really, only basic geology applied to some chemistry, and a bit of... well, anyway, I can take care of myself! So, is Lady Cessilia alright? And His Majesty?”

“They left for the castle a while ago, and I sure hope so,” nodded Tessandra.

All three of them turned their eyes toward the castle, witnessing the exact moment when Jinn the Red Dragon suddenly wreaked havoc on one of the towers. Several large stone bricks fell to the side, destroying more of the castle or the island it stood on before loudly splashing in the surrounding body of water. Tessandra grimaced.

“Fucking untamed dragon... That beast might become a serious problem if he keeps going.”

“Wait, that dragon is not one of yours?” exclaimed Sabael.

“You just realized that now? It’s not, that bitch Jisel is the owner of that one. No wonder he’s such a pain in the arse... Teenage dragons are the absolute worst, they have no self control, and this one doesn’t even have a proper master either. A real nightmare. If something happens to that bitch and he goes on a rampage... But don’t worry, I’m sure Cessilia will be able to handle it. She grew up with eight dragons around, this one is just a brat waiting to get his scaled butt kicked!”

“Shouldn’t we go and help?” asked Nana, sending anxious glances at the castle.

“I’m not too worried about those two,” Tessandra shook her head. “That stupid Red Dragon wouldn’t be causing such a mess if he wasn’t angry or

had gotten to his prey already. It looks fine so far... Heck, I bet Cessilia is the one unleashing hell inside right now. No, we should go and help Kassian, Darsan, and our dragons. From what I saw, the situation isn't exactly the best on their side, and I do not want the Yekara to get reinforcements from the outside. We've got enough on our plates here already."

"That's true," nodded Sabael. "They might not all be on the Yekara's side, but if word got out that the doors are open, more people will try to sneak into the Capital, which will only cause more issues. If they get in, those fights may not stop even if His Majesty wins. We need to calm the people outside."

"Will Sir Darsan be alright?"

"Drop the Sir, Nana. But yeah, that idiot could probably use a hand. He might be strong, but even he can't guard a whole bridge by himself if he's overwhelmed by the numbers... Let's just trust Cessi and her man will be alright and regroup with Kassian and Bastat first. Nana, I suppose it's no use to tell you to stay out of it?"

"I'm coming with you!"

"Got it. But please let us know next time you blow something up. Sab and I were seconds away from rushing inside that building too!"

"Oh, sorry..."

"Alright," chuckled Sabael. "Let's go before they notice us for real."

If the Yekara had noticed the trio, nobody would have done anything to stop them. They were still busy trying to control Naptunie's devastating fire, and hardly succeeding at all. Nana even had a little satisfied smile on as they heard a couple more explosions behind them while running toward the other end of the island. They did get into quite a handful of fights on their way, though. There wasn't a single peaceful street anymore. Most of the time, it was only people running in one direction or another, barricading their houses and shops, but Tessandra and Sabael did have to stop to get between mercenaries and the locals they were trying to rob

several times, or to help some citizens that had managed to corner a Yekara soldier. Strangely, Tessandra's armor was acting like a flag, as everyone they ran across immediately recognized the light green dragon scales, and many even cheered for them.

As they kept running, they crossed paths with more and more people. In each street, there were men standing in front of doors, ready to defend their homes, or people fighting off those that were now considered invaders. Needless to say, the trio was often welcomed, but not always really needed. The Yekara were either running back to protect their main residence, rushing to one of the main battles going on, or simply struggling to handle an infuriated group of folks. The fight looked like it would go on for a while, without really any clear winner. It was too scattered, too disorganized. Despite their advantage in numbers, Tessandra could see the locals were struggling, only trying to defend their own houses and not bothering to pursue them once the Yekara had given up. Their best luck would be to prevent them from regrouping. Right now, the island's unique architecture was working in their favor, forcing the troops to divide into small numbers and launch small attacks in the many streets. Tessandra and Sabael were doing their best to get rid of those they could, but they were also aware that the situation probably wasn't as good elsewhere; many people had decided to hide in their homes rather than risk their lives, which seemed fair. Pans and pitchforks could only get them so far against seasoned fighters.

As the three of them got closer to the downtown part of the Capital, the chaos intensified; this was clearly the second epicenter of the battle, and soon, Tessandra and Sabael found themselves constantly fighting to push their way through while also protecting Nana. She had grabbed a small dagger along the way, but she only used it in extreme cases of self-defense, or to assist her brother or Tessandra when it was safe enough for her to. Naptunie was in no way a fighter, but she was smart enough to evaluate the risks, and find herself safe spots to hide behind them. Her smaller frame, compared to Tessandra or her older brother, was also helping her get past some groups of soldiers without being noticed. She

quickly managed to find herself in the midst of their allies, where Kassian had taken control of a group of half-experienced fighters.

The first line was mainly composed of Royal Guards who had quickly understood that the King's side was not with the Yekara people, and had allied themselves with the man wearing dragon armor, as well as the Lady of the Sehsan Tribe. Bastat was also fighting; the young woman had already switched weapons and was now using what looked like a long and elegant metallic rope, with colored, round weights at each end. She captured man after man with those, and threw them at the feet of the soldiers for the locals who only then had to finish the job. Her main task, though, was clearly to oversee the whole fight. While Kassian was at the forefront, at the center of the crossroads, Lady Bastat stood several steps behind him, towering the battle from what seemed like a large wooden box. She was regularly shouting orders, and Nana quickly spotted lines of archers on the roofs around them, all wearing the colored outfits characteristic of her tribe. Eluding the fights and slithering through the crowd, Naptunie ran to her.

“Lady Bastat!”

“Lady Naptunie? Where did you come from?! What about His Majesty? And Lady Cessilia?”

“They are at the castle! They are fine... we think.”

“Lady Tessandra is with you?”

“Yes! Over there!”

Naptunie turned around, pointing at the area she had left Tessandra at. Bastat nodded, looking relieved. Then, she helped Naptunie climb next to her on her wooden box, quickly showing her their current status. They were at the end of the street, right where the large and main crossroad of the city began. It was the other very large plaza Naptunie knew well, for the roads from the two bridges of the west lead to this, from the north and south part of the island respectively, and then spread like a spider's web to all the smaller streets. On most days, there would even be a large market there, but right now, the whole place was a lot more chaotic than on a

market day. In fact, Naptunie couldn't even spot any of the familiar cobblestone pathways, all of them literally flooded with people fighting. It wasn't a pleasant sight. She had stayed with Tessandra and Sabael so far and mostly witnessed one-sided victories, but right here, the fighting was much more violent, bloody, and deadly. Some people were even trampling on the bodies gathered on the ground, and on one side, a house had been set on fire, threatening to spread the flames to all the nearby habitations. People were trying to contain the fire, but they also had to deal with the Yekara soldiers trying to fight them from the other side. It was a chaotic fight. The only place where she could actually draw a clear line between their side and the enemy was the very center of the plaza, where there was a half-circle empty in front of Prince Kassian.

His fighting skills were nothing but matching his cousin's; his movements were absolutely flawless. Even Naptunie and her non-existent combat training could tell his level was far above anyone else's on the plaza.

"His Highness has been able to prevent them from going any further," explained Bastat, "but we believe most of the Yekara have orders to seize control of this area. Luckily, we are not alone, the civilians are not having it, as you can see..."

Naptunie quickly analyzed the area, remembering the countless maps she had studied; it made sense for the enemy to want control of that specific area. Just like the other one her brother had almost died in, it was a major crossroad on the Capital's island. If they could block it, people wouldn't be able to access another area without making a large detour, and they would gain control of all the streets leading up to that place! Not only that, but burning the buildings, like they had begun doing, was another way to prevent people from fleeing. With the fire spreading, the locals wouldn't even be able to use their back doors to get to the adjacent street if they had one! She frowned, annoyed. Prince Kassian was indeed doing a great job of keeping the Yekara from taking control, but both sides were stuck there, and neither was managing to overwhelm the other. Unlike in the streets, in a large open area like this, their close and well-trained ranks were a huge advantage for the Yekara soldiers, while the citizens were easily

pushed back and cornered one by one. Bastat's archers saved several lives while Naptunie was analyzing the scene, but it wouldn't be enough.

"What do we do, what do we do...?" muttered Naptunie, thinking long and hard.

"Nana!"

Finally, Tessandra appeared next to them, looking out of breath, Sabael just steps behind her and still fighting an opponent.

"When the hell did you get here?!"

"I just did! Tessandra, I think we—"

A loud bang suddenly shook the area. Everyone lowered their head by reflex, before debris suddenly came flying down from above. Nana's scream died in her throat as she felt someone grab her and push her against a wall.

"What's happening?!" she cried, panicked.

"Stay there!"

She nodded. She wouldn't have been able to move an inch either way. Tessandra was literally pressing her against the wall behind them, Lady Bastat on her left. Nana glanced over Tessandra's arm to see the situation; it was as if something had exploded in the middle of the plaza, leaving a large hole in the cobblestones. The reason for that bang was found right above the hole: a large, round, and heavy-looking piece of metal full of large spikes. That horrible thing hadn't just crushed a portion of the ground, but also a dozen people, some screaming and laying in their own blood, while those who had been injured but could still move were trying to crawl away, only to be attacked right away by the Yekara.

"They're using fucking catapults!" shouted Tessandra. "Kassian!"

However, the Prince didn't hear her, and was already rushing near the impact point to try and save those people. Naptunie spotted her brother suddenly running in the same direction.

"Damn it!"

Another bang exploded, even louder. The next one had hit a building, projecting more debris around, and injuring twice as many people. Naptunie screamed again, more horrified and terrified. Those things were blowing open whole buildings!

“They are aiming at the citizens!” shouted Bastat. “Everyone, reform the ranks, now! Mix with the Yekara!”

It was easier said than done. Although it was clear the projectiles were sent into their side of the crowds, the citizens just couldn’t run ahead of the Yekara, it was about as dangerous and risky. The whole area had turned from a disorganized battle into complete chaos, the crowd running in all directions in fear of the next attack. Another suddenly appeared, and Nana closed her eyes, afraid it was coming their way. She heard a loud noise, and felt the ground trembling again, debris collapsing above of her.

“Nana! You alright?”

She dared to open her eyes. Tessandra had raised her sword above them to protect them from the debris, and her body was acting like a shield for Nana too. However, blood suddenly appeared on her face, a long trail running from her hairline to her chin. The vision of Tessandra injured suddenly had an effect like another bang for Naptunie. She opened her eyes wide, pinched her lips and frowned.

“No!” she suddenly exclaimed.

“W-what?”

Before Tessandra could add a word, Naptunie suddenly got down and escaped her protection, running out to see the damages.

“Nana, come back!”

She wasn’t listening at all. Naptunie’s eyes were going left, right, analyzing the scene of each crash without any fear for her own safety. When Tessandra caught up with her, she suddenly spun around before the fighter could say a word.

“They are firing from the direction of the bridge we didn’t leave Sir Darsan nor one of the dragons at! Judging from the distance, they must be right outside the Outer Wall! And if I’m right, they can’t fire any farther than this, but I don’t know how many catapults they have!”

“Are you sure?” muttered Tessandra, shocked.

“Absolutely sure!”

Naptunie’s eyes did show how confident she was. Tessandra glanced around; she had no idea how the hell she was able to calculate that, but she had to believe Nana either way. For most people, those things seemed to appear truly out of nowhere, and the speed didn’t give them any time for analysis, nor to run. Another one appeared in the sky, and Tessandra grabbed Nana again to take her to what she hoped to be a safe spot. They protected their heads and waited until the damage was done.

“Judging from the rhythm, they have at least two,” said Nana, coughing from some dust. “Two catapults. But they have to be really big to carry such a heavy weight, and by the time they recharge...”

“Nana, Nana, calm down! Focus. You said those things can’t go any farther, right? Can you tell the farthest they can land? What is the safe zone?”

Naptunie turned around, quickly doing the math. Tessandra had asked the question just in case, but she did not actually expect Nana to be able to predict this much... She was proven wrong once again when Nana’s little finger pointed at the end of a nearby building.

“From there... to there,” she said. “I’m almost sure they cannot hit any farther than that!”

“A-alright... Alright, I’ll get Kassian to move our side to that area. But Nana, he’s going to need my help here, too many people got hit already. Someone needs to stop those machines.”

“Understood!”

Nana waited and a couple of seconds of silence passed as she seemed to wait for Tessandra to turn to someone else. When Tessandra raised an eyebrow, her confident expression sank.

“Y-you can’t mean... me?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not sending you alone to destroy those. But you showed us you can sneak past the fighting, and you know the area like the back of your hand too. Just get to the bridge where Krai is, and take him with you to destroy those things.”

“W-w-what?!” exclaimed Naptunie, turning pale. “Tessa, you can’t expect me to borrow Sir Dragon like that!”

“He likes you Nana! Don’t worry, he’s smarter than he looks, he’ll listen!”

“B-but I don’t even have a single beignet with me! And I’ll be going alone? He can’t possibly listen to me like that!”

“I said, he likes you! Not just your beignets! Just go, Nana, hurry!”

A bit reluctantly, Naptunie turned around, and Tessandra pushed her toward what she had indicated as the safe zone. Nana glanced back; the situation was dire in the plaza. Many people had been injured by the falling spiky weights, and the Yekara were running to regain the area they had lost. She took a deep breath, spotting her brother amidst the confusion. She would be useless here. She could probably do something if it was with Sir Dragon’s help. He’d listen, right?

Trying not to think too much, Naptunie turned around and ran quickly.

“Oh, Sir Dragon,” she muttered to herself, “I really hope you’re in a good mood...”

Naptunie kept muttering to herself as she ran, trying to manage her breathing whilst being cautious of her surroundings; she was good at avoiding fights, but the area she was headed toward seemed to be the most dangerous of all. There were Yekara soldiers and mercenaries everywhere, and she had to retrace her steps or hide several times to avoid them. A couple of times, she even had no choice but to climb on top of a house,

over the roof, and land on the next street to avoid them. It was just as she had predicted: the farther she got from the main place where Kassian, Tessandra and Sabael fought, the harder it was to switch from one street to another. Right now, she was doing her very best to use everything she knew about the area to keep out of trouble.

She could still hear the projectiles violently hitting buildings or the ground far behind her, and every time, she feared for the others' lives. If it wasn't for that sound, regularly echoing behind her, perhaps Naptunie would have given up on Tessandra's crazy idea. At least, it seemed crazy to her. She wasn't just going to see Sir Dragon, she was supposed to actually convince the beast to attack a different area, and very specific weapons too! Nana had no idea how she was going to do that, though. She had never missed her family's beignets so much... Still, she kept running, thinking she'd figure out the situation once she got there... Luckily, as she diverted from the path to the one leading to the bridge Krai was on, she met less and less Yekara soldiers. In fact, many were running in the opposite direction, and couldn't be bothered with a Dorosef girl running on her own. The closer she got to the bridge, though, the more Nana's worries shifted from the explosions and men behind her, to the loud, terrifying growls she was running toward.

The Inner Wall's gates had been completely abandoned, to her surprise, and she arrived there to find the area completely deserted. On the other side of those gates, though, she could hear absolute carnage going on.

Naptunie stopped behind the gates, a cold chill running down her spine. She could hear the dragon's loud growls and men screaming, shouting behind, the sound of swords clashing, and even bodies splashing into the water from time to time. Not only that, but the ground under her was literally shaking. She couldn't blame the men for having abandoned that area of the city; she was regretting being there herself... Trying to keep in mind the urgency of the situation and the sight of a dragon calmly eating beignets out of her hand, Naptunie closed her fists, and after a deep breath, used all of her strength to push the heavy gates. Just that already took a lot of effort and a little while as she had never realized how heavy those

really were. She struggled to push them until she could sneak past, stepping alone on the bridge. Or, more accurately, alone on her side of the bridge.

The other end was, as she had imagined, a bloody massacre. Krai's large body was occupying almost all of the bridge's width, and even its black tail was dangerously swishing left and right, a few yards ahead of where Nana stood. The dragon's back and butt were mostly blocking her sight, but the little she could see from what was happening on the other side already terrified her. There was a lot of blood. Not only that, but she could see human limbs regularly being thrown sideways, some ending up in the river when the dragon didn't enthusiastically chomp it mid-air.

"Oh, holy fish..." she muttered.

Nana had already seen a lot of blood and bodies today, but a dragon devouring living humans was a whole new level of horror for her. She could see the Black Dragon was having fun, toying around with them, its large paw suddenly squishing a human body against the white bricks of the bridge. Naptunie took a deep breath. She was supposed to bother Sir Dragon in the middle of that? Had Tessandra gone insane?! There was no way she wouldn't be gobbled up too! Still, she could hear, and now also see, the large spiky balls of metal flying in the sky to brutally land in the Capital. Nana didn't even need to think about the damages done; the mere confirmation that she had been right, the projectiles coming from the Outer Wall, was enough to reassure her she had been right to run here.

Despite that, she only dared to take a couple of steps toward the dragon; she had to admire the men on the other side, who were still fighting hard to try and get past anyway despite the large, bloody piles of bodies already spread across the bridge... Krai didn't even need to move much; the humans were running right in the dragon's direction, swords up, and a large bite was enough to welcome them and chomp three men's bodies at once. Naptunie stood there for several seconds, trying to think about the best way to get the dragon's attention without being the next one eaten up. As much as she trusted Tessandra, she really didn't have much confidence

in taming a dragon when she didn't have the right treat for it... or she potentially was the treat herself.

With pearls of sweat running down her nape, she cautiously stepped forward.

“S-Sir Dragon?” she called out.

She was almost relieved when she got no response. She took another deep breath, immediately followed by a huge bang behind her, which gave her the wave of bravery to try again. If her friends' life depended on her, she could do it!

“Sir Dragon!”

This time, Krai suddenly lifted its large head, and one red eye finally spotted Naptunie, standing alone in the middle of the bridge. Naptunie felt her bravery melt like snow under the sun. Luckily, so did all her ability to move, and when the dragon turned around to face her, completely ignoring the dozens of men, its hips swooped across the bridge in the process, she could only try to take deep breaths and keep the blood flowing to her brain.

“H-hi...” she heard her voice mutter.

The dragon's head suddenly came to meet her, snout first, strangely lowered and grazing the ground as if it was trying to match her height. Even more disturbing was the blood-covered human hand hanging out from between two fangs. Naptunie blinked twice, and forced herself to look up at the pair of glowing ruby eyes.

“I-I kind of need your help...” she muttered.

The dragon tilted its head, almost in a cute way. She could hear the blades on the other side trying to attack the wall of scales, but as soon as they got a bit annoying, the huge scaled butt and paws would move a bit, and suddenly crush more of them underneath. The stomping was enough to make the whole bridge tremble and creak, making Nana fear it would actually collapse under its weight... It was built to let horses and carriages through, but not a gigantic creature like a full-grown dragon!

When Krai growled softly, its breathing reaching her in hot waves of air, Naptunie took another deep breath.

“W-we need to get over there,” she said, trying to talk fast, “to the other bridge, outside the wall, and destroy the catapults! I-I know it’s not the original p-plan, but Lady Tessa sent me, and, uh... it’s important...”

The more she spoke, the more she realized the chance the dragon caught any of that were rather low. She had always seen Tessandra and Cessilia casually speak to the dragon, and Krai seemed to somehow understand the gist of it, but this was her first time alone! She tried to imagine she was speaking to the family cat, before realizing it wouldn’t help either. The dragon was probably smarter, to some extent... Naptunie glanced to the side, feeling increasingly nervous. She was wasting so much time right now! She could endure the gruesomeness of the dragon, but if she lost any time here, more lives would be lost, and she did not want to be responsible for this!

Nana clenched her small fists, and tried to imagine what the pair of Princesses would do in her stead. Her eyes went back to the piece of limb hanging from the dragon’s maw, still very disturbing.

“D-drop it!”

She had tried to put as much intent as she could, and even pointed her index toward the ground. However, after a few seconds of silence, the dragon began to very slowly resume chewing.

“N-no, I said drop it! Oh, come on, that’s... a bit disgusting... I’m sure it’s not really good for your stomach either, Sir Dragon... Yuck...”

Naptunie felt like she was going to be sick. Either she was misunderstood or the dragon was mocking her, she couldn’t tell. A few seconds later, at least, there was nothing left of the gruesome body, but some blood on the dark scales. This, she could endure. Still, Naptunie knew she had to get control of that dragon, for everyone’s sake. She glanced to the side again. It was just a few yards away. Just a dragon’s big jump...

“We need to go!” she declared.

Clenching her fists and persuading herself she could do it, she suddenly walked up to the dragon. While she was hoping very hard not to get gobbled up for her impertinence, she was even more surprised to hear Krai growl, very softly, and turn its head to the side, following her. Still, Nana kept going until she reached its side and carefully began climbing. She didn't remember it being so high... She wasn't very fit, and the climb itself was a lot. Panting and grunting, Naptunie kept going, telling herself at least the dragon wouldn't try and bite its own neck... She finally reached the top, and found herself right at the collar.

Krai suddenly raised its head, and she had no choice but to grab the first thing she could, falling forward with her arms around the dragons' neck. While well aware of the ridiculousness of her position, Naptunie couldn't help but hang on even tighter, praying not to fall off... When the dragon was fully standing up and somewhat stable, she tried to repress her desire to cry.

“A-alright... There! We need to go there, please!”

It took all of her strength to raise an arm in said direction, and it took less than a second before Krai suddenly took off, surprisingly obeying her right away. Naptunie didn't see much, aside from the ground and sea moving quickly under them, and hearing the desperate scream in her ears.

One second later, they brutally landed, and she heard many, many men shouting. She forced herself to sit up, despite literally all her limbs trembling. Krai didn't even wait for her to say anything; the dragon was well aware of what to do when dozens of men ran in its direction with their swords up and obvious aggressive attitudes. Naptunie could only hang on for dear life once more. The dragon began to violently jump, left and right, moving around like a terrible earthquake under her. Not only that, but she heard men shouting, and more of the dragon's growls, which terrified her. Nana wanted to scream, but she didn't even dare move a muscle, including her jaw. She had no idea how long it lasted, but it felt way, way too long. Nana closed her eyes as hard as she could, crying and hoping it would end soon.

Suddenly, it stopped. She could still hear dragon growls, but the earthshaking had miraculously stopped. Two large hands came out of nowhere, and she felt herself being grabbed under her armpits, and despite how stunned she was, she was dragged off the dragon's back.

“Nana!”

She opened her eyes upon recognizing the familiar voice.

Holding her at arms' length, a huge smile on his face, was none other than Darsan. His hair was an absolute mess, and his face covered with dirt and dried blood, but he looked happier than ever, his dark eyes sparkling with joy.

“What are you doing here?!” he exclaimed, gently putting her down.

Nana's legs almost gave out when they actually met the ground, but fortunately, Darsan's hands didn't leave her waist. For a second, she got a bit dizzy, and had to remind herself to breathe and think.

“Th-the ca-... The c-catapults... We came here to...”

“Oh, those?”

Darsan finally let go and stepped back, to point somewhere behind him at a large pile of wood that were indeed catapults just seconds ago. They were all taken care of already, literally wrecked apart, reduced to large pieces of wood. Krai was already going through the mess, its claw digging through as if looking for a toy or something. Suddenly, the Black Dragon seemed to have found what it had been looking for: one large, spiky ball that was meant to be sent over the wall. While it began enthusiastically playing around with it, the few men that hadn't been crushed in the ordeal took their chance to run away, absolutely terrified by the sight of the big Black Dragon. It seemed like the wild rodeo from earlier had been somewhat justified, in the end. Nana let out a faint sigh of relief.

“Thank the gods it's taken care of,” she muttered, thinking about the people in the plaza.

“Yep!”

“B-but Prince Darsan, what are you doing here?”

“I heard you scream, and I saw Krai, so I ran over here! I mean, I was in the area, anyway, so—”

“What? But what about the bridge you were supposed to guard?!”

Naptunie’s mind panicked, thinking Darsan had completely abandoned the southwest bridge to come over here. Or was he perhaps forced to flee? He didn’t look like someone who had lost a fight... He was messy, for sure, but she couldn’t spot a single injury on him. Still, Naptunie couldn’t understand why he was here and not on the bridge. She was already having scary thoughts of angry men destroying the gates, invading the city... However, before her imagination ran any wilder, Darsan grimaced, visibly embarrassed.

“Yeah, uh... About that... About that bridge, I may have, uh... caused a little bit of an accident...”

“What? Don’t tell me you... you destroyed the bridge?”

“I didn’t mean to!” he said, trying to explain himself. “I really didn’t! But that thing was just a bit too weak, you know, and I may have, uh... used a bit too much strength while fighting, so it began to crack all of a sudden, and by the time I ran back to the edge, splash! I-it fell down into the river...”

“You destroyed the bridge?!” exclaimed Nana, getting mad all of a sudden. “You actually destroyed the bridge! Do you know how long it took to build it?! And how many bricks of white stone were used too?! And that bridge was really important, it was helping the flow of traffic into the Capital, it led straight to one of the biggest markets for the people that were coming from the south! Now everyone is going to have to take a long detour around to get into the Capital, not to mention the inconveniences, increased traffic, and even the time it’s going to take to repair that bridge!”

“I’m very, very sorry...” muttered Darsan, whilst making himself smaller in front of the infuriated Nana. “I didn’t know...”

There were even frustrated tears appearing in her eyes, and her accusatory look was literally pinning Darsan where he was with guilt. He certainly hadn't expected it to be such a big deal, and Naptunie's sudden burst of anger and tears was taking him completely by surprise. His body moved like it was torn between running to her or in the opposite direction.

"You have to rebuild it!"

"I-I will!" he exclaimed, seeing a light of hope. "I swear I'm going to put it back brick by brick if needed!"

Nana let out a heavy annoyed sigh. The truth was, she knew it wasn't a matter for tears at all. Darsan's mistake had just happened right after one of the most traumatic moments of her life, and seemed to be the next best thing for her to unleash her already battered nerves on, after they'd been put through an awful lot for the previous hour. Of course, she was genuinely horrified about the bridge being gone, but it seemed like quite a secondary matter, given the situation... Naptunie looked around. Since there was one bridge Darsan had destroyed, and Krai had gone on a rampage here, they could consider these two entry points into the city now completely blocked, which could still work to their advantage.

"Don't be mad, alright?" said Darsan, still visibly worried. "I promise I will do my best. There's still a bit left too..."

Naptunie turned back to him. The Prince looked almost pitiful now, trying to justify his mistake and be forgiven. He was a head taller than her, but right now, he was keeping his shoulders and head low, and his fingers were all fidgety. Nana sighed.

"I... I think it will be fine," she said, a bit embarrassed about her earlier shouting. "It's not really important right now. Is... uh... Sir Shiny Dragon alright?"

"Kian? Oh, yeah, he's doing completely fine. I mean, last I saw, he was hanging on great."

“A-alright. Then, I think this area is secure now, so we should leave Sir Dragon at the next bridge, and get back inside the city. I think everyone could use our help.”

Darsan gave her a strong nod and enthusiastically punched his palm.

“I like that plan! Let’s do that!”

“But you can’t destroy any more bridges!” Nana added, raising her index finger with a cute frown.

“I-I won’t! I really won’t...”

Naptunie sighed a bit, but turned around, looking at the Black Dragon. Krai was still happily digging through the mess of ruined catapults to find more spiky balls to play with, or happily hunting down the few unfortunate men that hadn’t been running fast enough.

“Sir Dragon!”

She had made sure to shout loud enough for him to hear and, to her surprise, the dragon immediately turned its large head her way, its big red eyes opened wide with a curious expression. Nana tried to swallow the wave of anxiousness that was coming back. Would she be able to ride the dragon again after the fright from earlier?

“Let’s go!”

Before she could say a word, Darsan suddenly grabbed her around the waist, and in two movements, lifted Nana onto the Black Dragon’s back. Krai moved right away, but this time, Naptunie was actually able to hold onto Darsan, who was much more stable. She even managed to keep her eyes open to witness the Black Dragon taking a couple of long leaps to the next bridge, getting back to where she had gotten him from. They told the dragon to stay there and guard it. Then, Darsan helped her down, but he didn’t let go of her hand while they ran back toward the city.

“Let’s go get my sister and the others!” he exclaimed with a big smile, running on the bridge.

Naptunie was literally dragged behind him, but surprisingly, Darsan managed to clear the way in front of them without having to let go of her hand at all. He swung his large sword left and right, sending the Yekara soldiers flying with incredible strength. Nana was now starting to understand how the bridge had collapsed...

The two of them ran all the way back, nothing and no one capable of stopping them. Unlike Nana who had been forced to take detours to avoid confronting any of the enemy, Darsan was more than happy to run head first into the crowd. The young Prince's colossal strength was knocking any enemy out of the way in a blow or two, allowing the two of them to simply run in a straight line, not taking any detours at all. Thanks to that, they got back to the main plaza even faster than Nana would have thought, and completely unscathed too.

However, once they got there, she quickly realized the situation at the main battlefield was still very complicated. From behind Darsan, she tried to assess the situation, glancing below his arms and in between their enemies to see the damages. The background had changed again, and not in a good way. Not only had more spiky balls been sent before Krai got to the catapults, damaging the roads and buildings around, but fires had been started too. While the crowd seemed to have doubled, it wasn't exactly in their favor. A lot of the civilians had run or were busy trying to save their family and friends, doing their best to avoid the Yekara fighters and, if possible, leaving the area. The Yekara soldiers and their mercenary allies, however, had used the newly caused damages to gain more ground. Soon, they found themselves facing a dozen of them, and Darsan had no choice but to let go of Nana's hand.

“Stay behind me!”

Even if he hadn't said so, Naptunie would have never dared to take a step ahead. The road in front of them was completely blocked by those men and, even more fearsome, the powerful swings of Darsan's sword were much too terrifying. If he could send grown soldiers in heavy armor flying that easily, Nana knew she could be swept across the island in a blink! At least, it seemed she was completely safe by staying a couple of steps

behind the Prince; everyone around and behind them was dead, dying, or stunned. While Darsan fought effortlessly, there were still an awful amount of Yekara soldiers here, slowing them down. Had more gathered over here after two bridges had been made unusable, and their main residence burned? Naptunie and Darsan had arrived from the opposite side of where she had left Tessandra and the others, but she couldn't really tell how the battle had evolved. The smoke coming up from the burning buildings, along with the rain, was permeating the whole scene with a dense gray fog. It was stinging her eyes a bit too. She was getting gradually more nervous, forced to hide behind Darsan and unable to do anything. And it wasn't in Nana's nature to do nothing.

As soon as she saw an opportunity, Naptunie ran to the nearest safe building, and began climbing up. Careful not to injure herself, she kept Darsan in sight, but she still had to see where they needed to go.

Once she found herself on the roof, Naptunie took a second to secure her position, making sure she wouldn't slide or fall and unnecessarily bother Darsan. Then, she took a look around, squinting and trying to protect her eyes from the bothersome fumes. She quickly spotted Prince Kassian and his shiny dragon scale armor, still flawlessly dominating the battle. Once again, there was a small field around him where none of the enemies dared to approach. His blades were moving at an incredible speed, and Nana realized he might have switched weapons. She even saw him stab someone with his sword, steal one of the men's knives and throw it across the field, and get his sword back again before the first body hit the ground. It was impressive. Now she had seen all of them fight; Naptunie was realizing that although they had all been trained by the same War God, Cessilia, Darsan, Kassian, and Tessandra all had their own style of fighting.

Darsan didn't need any fancy movements, his brute force was already beyond what most men could handle. He probably didn't have the patience either, he just enjoyed fighting as if it was all in fun, leaving his opponents no chance. Once in a while, he'd get a worthy opponent able to handle him, and he would change his actions a bit, finding the best way

to break them down. His attacks were brutal and merciless. His brother, on the other hand, managed to be faster, using less strength but sharper, more effective movements. Naptunie knew little to nothing about the intricacies of sword fighting, but her eyes were learning a lot just from watching either one of the Princes move. Despite the differences between them, she couldn't even tell who was actually better. She had a hunch the older brother was slightly more detailed and precise, but it felt like Darsan was being playful on purpose, and only got serious for brief moments.

Feeling better since the Prince was safe, she tried to find Tessandra or Lady Bastat next. Naptunie's heart sank when she realized the building they had been on previously was currently on fire. Had something happened to them? Her nervousness on the rise, she kept looking around until she finally spotted Tessandra. The Princess seemed completely fine, and even a little bit excited. Her green armor was covered in blood, which was why it had taken Nana an extra minute to find her, but she was fighting more fiercely than ever, a grin stuck on her lips as if she was having some fun. Naptunie quickly spotted her own brother, just steps behind her, who seemed not only to be fighting, but also helping to evacuate those who were injured. He looked fine too, perhaps a bit rougher than Tessandra, his face covered in soot, but she knew her big brother, he could pull through anything. He was probably focused more on rescuing than fighting too.

She couldn't catch sight of Lady Bastat, though, even after searching for several minutes. Did she leave the area for some reason? Or perhaps was she with the injured? From where she was, Naptunie could easily see how their numbers had been reduced. They had lost a third of the people that were fighting with them before, while the Yekara had gained about the same amount of fighters, she was almost certain. She could see the spiky balls had caused a lot of damage, digging holes in the ground, with bodies spread around the impact areas... Not only that, but the few fires were blocking some roads and making some areas more difficult to stay in, allowing the Yekara soldiers to win some ground and control in the plaza too. Nana's heart sank. They were not doing well. Prince Kassian was still

bravely securing the space he was in, but the soldiers were almost surrounding him now.

Things were taking a better turn with Darsan's arrival, though. The younger Prince was easily sweeping the enemies out of the way, virtually digging a hole in the crowd of fighters. There was nothing and no one able to stop him, and he was making his way, slowly but surely, to meet his brother in the middle of the battlefield. Naptunie couldn't help but be a bit proud, until she realized he had gotten quite far. Far from her, still perched on her rooftop. She glanced down, only to nervously realize he hadn't just left bodies behind. There were men down there, who hadn't noticed her. Yet.

Naptunie took a big breath and wiped her eyes, teary from the smoke. She realized, those men were there for the same reason; they didn't dare to approach Darsan, and they couldn't back down either, the smoke was too strong behind them. She could even hear more people coughing from there...

Suddenly, she realized something.

Darsan and Kassian were both also surrounded by the smoke, but unlike the men around them, they weren't bothered. Nana gasped, wondering if she was wrong. Perhaps were they somehow moving enough air around them? It didn't seem like it. The mix of rain, smoke, and dust caused by all the collapsed buildings had created a dangerous mix of heavy smoke that was hindering most of the men on the battlefield; that explained why so many civilians had evacuated the area, while the stubborn Yekara soldiers were doing their very best to hang on. Still, the more she watched, the more Nana was sure: the Dragon Princes didn't mind the smoke at all! In fact, it made sense. If they had the same abilities as their sister and cousin, fire shouldn't be much of an issue for them... and neither was smoke.

So excited about her finding, Naptunie wanted to tell Darsan or Tessandra, but she realized she was still way too far! She glanced around; she could hop on the next building and perhaps get down on the next street, but that was dangerous. Still, she glanced down at the men gathered beneath her.

Naptunie took a deep breath, deciding in a split moment. Better to try her luck on the next roof than down there!

“Up there!”

She froze right after the first step. Too late. The men had spotted her. While Darsan was too far away for them to fight, poor isolated Nana was the perfect target. She grimaced.

“Oh no...”

“Get her!”

The men began to climb, faster than her, and Nana retreated as fast as she could with an irrepressible panicked scream. She only had seconds before they got to her! If they killed her before she could put her plan to work, she’d regret it forever! In her hurry, she tripped and fell down on her hands and knees, making her cry out in pain again.

“Grab that little b—”

“DON’T. TOUCH. MY. NANA!”

Naptunie heard the loudest noise, and looked down just in time to see a body flying in the opposite direction. She had no idea how Darsan had possibly come back so fast, but the young Prince was there and absolutely furious. He seemed to have almost doubled in size, and was reducing those men to pieces with impossible violence. It was all over in seconds, but the bloodbath made Nana grimace and look away.

“Are you alright?! Nana! Are you hurt? I’m so sorry!”

“I-I’m coming down!”

“I got you!”

Nana took a deep breath and slid down the roof, landing very softly in Darsan’s arms. He greeted her with his big smile back on his face.

“Got you!” he said, visibly satisfied. “Are you alright? Did they hurt you?”

“N-no, I’m good...”

“Don’t worry, I’m not letting them touch a hair on you!” he exclaimed.

“A-alright...”

“You’re totally safe with me!”

“I see, but–”

“Don’t worry, no one can beat me! I mean, perhaps my dad and my bro, but–”

“Darsan!” she exclaimed. “...Can you put me down now? ...Please?”

“Oh.”

Darsan finally let her down with an embarrassed smile. Nana tried to replicate his smile, but there was fresh blood on his cheek, and she couldn’t get over that, her eyes naturally going there. She took a deep breath and glanced to the side. The men he had been fighting earlier were obviously waiting for him to come back, but in no hurry to resume the fight... or, more accurately, the massacre. Nana sighed and quickly grabbed the bottom of her skirt, ripping off a piece of fabric. Then, while Darsan was still surprised by that, she suddenly began wiping his cheek with a determined expression.

“Listen,” she said. “We need to make the smoke from the fire stronger. Not more fires, just the smoke. Those men aren’t immune to the smoke like you, so if it gets worse than this, they will naturally be at a loss, like the civilians. We can trap them here, in the plaza, with you and Prince Kassian to fight them, but we need to prevent them from spreading to the other streets. ...You understand?”

“More kicking asses, smoke, blocking the nearby streets. Got it! ...But if you don’t want me to cause more fire, what do you want me to do then?”

“Just keep fighting! The nearby streets are already blocked with the fires, collapsed buildings, or smoke, but if I can find a way to get across and control the fires on the other side, we can make sure no more Yekara flee to the streets, and you and Prince Kassian and Tessandra only need to finish them off here!”

“That would be good?” Darsan asked.

“That would be a decent plan, I think.”

“Alright. So... you just need to get to Tessandra, right?”

“Yes?” asked Neptunie, a bit confused.

“Got it. Come on!”

Before Neptunie could protest, Darsan suddenly helped her get back to the roof. She wondered if he only meant to help her get across or have her stay safe, but to her surprise, he climbed up with her, standing next to her once they found themselves on top of the roof.

“Where’s Tessa?”

“O-over there,” said Neptunie, pointing in her direction.

“Oh, easy!”

“Easy?”

“Okay, cross your arms. Chin down.”

Neptunie obeyed by mere reflex, but before she could say a word, she suddenly felt Darsan grab her, her feet lifted off the ground, and the very next second, her body was thrown toward the sky.

Her terrified scream echoed above the battlefield, which moved quickly under her. She saw hundreds of eyes looking up at her, all with the same dumbfounded expression. She vaguely heard another voice shouting and, way too quickly, she found herself descending way too fast in Tessandra’s direction. Nana screamed again. The young woman lifted her eyes, opened them wide in shock, and dropped her weapons just in time to open her arms and receive her. The shock was violent, but somehow, Tessandra managed to catch her and they only stumbled a couple of steps back.

“Holy dragon shit, Nana! What the actual fuck?!”

Nana didn’t even have the voice to answer. She was still trembling and, when Tessandra let go, she fell down to her knees, all her strength leaving her body. He had just sent her flying across the battlefield!

“Darsan, you crazy fuck!” Tessandra shouted. “Wait until this is over, I’m going to fucking kill you! Are you alright, Nana? Do you need to throw up? I’m so sorry...”

“I... I... He just...”

“Yep. That’s Darsan for you. I’m sorry, he used to play that with his little brothers, I don’t think he realized you’re not exactly made for that kind of game...”

A game? That was as fun as a game for him?! Naptunie tried to keep herself from crying and, with Tessandra’s help, she got back on her feet, just in time when her brother appeared next to her.

“You stopped them,” said Sabael, looking out of breath. “Good job, sis.”

“Why did that dumbass send you here?” asked Tessandra. “Please tell me there was an actual reason, or else I swear I’m going to murder him.”

“Y-yes,” nodded poor Nana. “I-I have a plan...”

“Oh, thank the gods. What is it? Don’t worry, I promise I’m going to kick his ass and tell him to never do that again...”

While trying to catch her breath and get back to a normal heart rate, Naptunie quickly explained her plan to Tessandra, who nodded all along. They glanced around at their side of the battlefield, agreeing to her plan.

“That’s a good plan, Nana. Leave me and the boys to it, you and Sabael can work on the side to create more smoke and make sure the Yekara who escape this area are either captured or forced back here. Darsan, Kassian, and I will have no problem if those guys are hindered by the smoke, we may even be able to force them to give up.”

“I doubt that,” said Sabael, “but I agree, that’s a good plan.”

“Where is Lady Bastat?” Nana asked. “I thought we could ask her for some fabrics to create large fans and direct the smoke...”

“She’s injured, so she was sent to the back, but we can ask the Sehsan, I doubt they will refuse,” explained Tessandra. “They are two streets down, trying to coordinate everything with your tribe. We need to get things over

with here soon, though, I heard it's getting ugly up there, and I'm itching to check in on Cessilia too."

Just as she said that, a loud dragon growl echoed far above them. They turned their eyes toward the castle, where Jinn's red body was furiously attacking one of the towers. It had destroyed half of the brick walls, leaving only a bit standing. Nana's face got paler again, imagining Cessilia up there facing a dragon. Next to her, Tessandra was squinting her eyes even more, surprised by something she thought she had seen. A silver streak. It was very small and faint, but she was almost sure she had seen it.

"Cessi..."

"Come on, Nana," said Sabael. "We should get moving as fast as we can!"

"Go," nodded Tessandra.

Giving her one last look, Naptunie quickly left the area, running after her older brother. Tessandra got down on one knee to grab her swords, the blood already washed away from the blades by the rain. But just as her fingers grazed the ground, she felt something. She froze. It was extremely subtle, but she felt a very faint shake coming from the ground. A second one, shortly after. Her fingers tightened up around the handles. ...An earthquake? She slowly stood up, listening. The sea was streets away from here, but she could hear it raging furiously. The waves crashing against the island were somehow getting... louder. It was abnormally strong. Tessandra began to breathe more heavily, sensing something was coming. It was as if the battlefield around her had been reduced to a silent, slow background, while all of her senses and instincts were focused on a bigger danger. She glanced up at the sky, only catching dark clouds and at times, blinding lightning bolts. Still, she couldn't shake that feeling. Trying to ignore it, and feeling the enemies gathering around her again, she raised her arms, preparing to resume the fight. She noticed how her hair was standing up under the armor's leather.

Suddenly, she heard it. Forgetting all about the fight, Tessandra turned around, her heart beating like crazy. She hadn't dreamed that too, had she?

Her eyes fixated on the skies, on the horizon, she waited, restless. She heard it again.

This time, she turned to Kassian, yards away from her, as if to confirm she wasn't crazy. She wasn't going crazy. The Prince had stopped fighting too, with the same shocked, torn expression. He had heard it too.