

Kazima whirled around, brandishing her double sided thorn blades as she dropped into a fighting stance. Using her shield to protect herself, she took a moment to size up her foe before lunging, separating the two thorn blades nestled behind her shield in one deft movement. One thorn remained protruding out from the edge of the shield in her right hand; it protected her flank as she used her left hand to plunge the other thorn deep into the side of the practice dummy, the blade sliding easily between the woven vines that made up the figure.

"Your form has improved," Niketa said as she walked into the training chamber, holding out a bulb of water.

Kazima placed the shield half of her weapon gently on the floor before accepting the bulb. She lowered herself heavily onto the woven reed floor, drinking deeply before replying. "And yet you don't sound pleased."

Niketa sat down gently, tucking her skirts underneath her before settling next to Kazima. Without looking at the other woman, she responded, "I saw Tsan training."

Kazima finished the bulb of water, siphoning out the last drops before tossing the used bulb into the nearest compost patch. When she realized Niketa was not going to continue speaking, she pulled her hair free from the tight bun it had been wrestled into and started to comb it out without her fingers. "And?"

"You will lose," Niketa said, voice as calm and even as always, still staring ahead at the weavings hung on the walls of the round chamber.

Kazima stopped trying to braid her sweaty hair, instead tying it up roughly into a ponytail before pushing herself off the floor. Silently, Niketa watched as she pulled the lone thorn blade from the dummy and started to polish it with the bottom of her tunic.

"I will lose," Kazima echoed.

Niketa stood up, picking up the shield and thorn that remained on the ground and wordlessly handing them to Kazima.

"I will lose," Kazima repeated, "and Tsan will win the war for the tribes of Dzeurin. They will be allowed to divert the Mulofi River into their land, and thousands of Aktoli, thousands of my people, will die."

"If only poisons were allowed—" Niketa began.

"Then I might have a chance," Kazima cut in, "and if we still warred according to the old ways, I would die in the duel tomorrow. Then who would lead our people through the coming famine?" She reconnected the parts of her weapon with a savage twist, turning away from Niketa. "There is no use in dwelling on what could be."

Niketa laid a hand on Kazima's shoulder. "Kazima..."

Kazima tensed at her touch before leaning back into it, almost imperceptibly. "No matter. We must prepare. All the training in the world cannot help me win tomorrow's fight, but we can discuss how to meet the challenges that will follow."

"Of course," Niketa said. She squeezed Kazima's shoulder, firmly but gently, before letting go. She started to speak, then hesitated. Finally she said, in a voice so quiet and pinched it seemed like the words barely forced their way out of her lips, "There is another way."

Kazima abruptly turned around to face her, eyes bright. "Another way?"

Niketa nodded, tight-lipped.

Kazima gripped Niketa's arms tightly, the edge of the shield that was still in her left hand bumping both of their sides. "What is it?"

"Our apothecaries have created a potion. It will give you strength enough to win tomorrow's duel," Niketa squeezed her eyes shut, swallowed, and then opened her eyes to meet Kazima's gaze, "but it will put such a strain on your body that you would die before the next moonbloom."

The thorn blades fell to the ground with a soft thud as Kazima released Niketa's arms. She threw her head back and let out a sharp, mirthless laugh. "Isn't that illegal?"

"According to *The Seeds of War*, it is dishonorable to bring potions into the theater of war. It doesn't say anything about what you consume before you enter the theater of war," Niketa replied.

"A loophole, then," Kazima said, her mouth a thin line.

"A technicality," Niketa rebutted, "or an oversight. Call it whatever you like. *The Seeds of War* also says, 'Every plant has adaptations to help it survive, be it through thorns, poison, or infectious spores. No plant is good or evil for acting according to nature's law. It is not immoral to use the tools at your disposal to ensure the survival of your people.'"

"And the only tool that I have at my disposal," Kazima said, fixing Niketa with a piercing gaze, "is my life."

"You do not have to use it," Niketa said, eyes darting to one side, then the other, focusing on anything but Kazima. "No one knows about this save the apothecaries and the two of us. No one will think less of you for choosing to live."

"I would think less of me," Kazima replied, "You would think less of me."

Niketa met Kazima's gaze, eyes shining with an intensity that she usually concealed under a veneer of calculating watchfulness. "Never."

Kazima balled her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her palms. "It is my duty to protect my people. They must be my first consideration."

"*The Roots of Government* says, 'A leader must be as the sun to her people. She must provide warmth, sustenance, and guidance.' Kazima, without the sun, the flowers would die."

"What use is the sun if the garden has died of drought?" Kazima rebutted. Several pieces of hair had escaped the hastily tied loop and now hung unevenly around her face. One had begun to stick to the sweat on her neck. Her deep brown eyes blazed beneath long lashes, contrasting with the flush of her cheeks. When she spoke, her breath brushed Niketa's cheeks. "Besides, I am not the sun. I'm far more replaceable."

Niketa shook her head. "Not to me."

"You are my advisor and my dearest friend. Tell me, what do you think I should do?"

"As your advisor, I had to share this information with you."

"And as my friend?" Kazima pressed. "What do you advise?"

"I cannot." Niketa shook her head once again. "Kazima, in this I cannot be both advisor and friend."

They stood there for several moments, Niketa's words hanging in the air between them, held aloft by their shallow breaths.

Finally, Kazima spoke, "I will do it. I must." The firm set of her jaw was betrayed by the uncertainty in her eyes as she looked at Niketa, searching for support and guidance as she had done hundreds of times before.

Niketa cast her eyes downwards, unable to provide what Kazima sought. "I knew you would."

Kazima tightened her lips briefly before forging onward. "I will formalize arrangements today to ensure Kazhe is designated as heir, with the condition that you stay on as primary advisor. They are still young, and will need your guidance."

"Yes, my lady." Niketa said.

“Although we will not lose the Mulofi River this time, the Dzeurin will declare war again as soon as the mandatory Time of Peace ends. You must help Kazhe devise a more long-term solution before that happens.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Niketa,” Kazima said, roughly brushing her hair back from her forehead. “You have not spoken to me like this in many cycles. Like we are bound only by the bonds of duty.”

Niketa remained quiet, eyes downcast, hands hidden in the folds of her skirts. It looked like words were beating themselves against her lips, which were pursed tightly as if one escaped syllable could somehow destroy everything even though the world was already crashing down around her.

“Niketa,” Kazima said again, softly. She raised her hand to Niketa’s cheek, gently asking the other woman to lift her head and meet her gaze. When she spoke, her voice came out ragged, edged with trembling emotion rather than the staunch determination characteristic of the leader she aspired to be. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry to make the selfish choice.”

Kazima felt Niketa shake her head, felt the vibrations of a barely audible laugh of disbelief. “You’re not the selfish one.”

“But I am. I’m doing the brave, stupid thing and leaving you with all the difficult work of rebuilding. You have always given me more than I have asked for, and here I am requesting even greater feats.” Kazima felt a wretched laugh of her own force its way out of her throat. “Going out in a blaze of glory only takes a moment. Being the steady light that guides Aktol is the work of a lifetime.”

“For Aktol, I will do it gladly,” Niketa said. With a hitch in her breath, she added, “For you, I will do it gladly.”

Before Kazima could respond, Niketa pulled away. “I must go. There is much to prepare.” She turned and walked towards the entrance of the training chamber.

Kazima lowered her hand, still warm from Niketa’s skin. As she bent down to retrieve her thorn blade, she heard Niketa call her name, softly, tenderly. When she looked up, she saw Niketa, framed in the chamber entranceway by beams of afternoon sunlight.

“Even when you have been returned to the earth,” Niketa said, “my roots will always grow towards yours. Like a flower turning towards the sun, my face will always seek your light.”

She turned and was gone, leaving only sunbeams behind.