

*“A leader must be as the sun to her people. She must provide warmth, sustenance, and guidance as they grow towards her light.”*

-The Roots of Government

*Tomorrow, I will go to war.* As she rubbed linseed oil into her thorn blade, Kazima tried on the thought and found it ill-fitting, as unnatural as the Dzeurin clothes she had worn when her family visited the tribes as a gesture of goodwill. Even at only 12 cycles, Kazima had stood tall and proud like a true Aktoli princess despite feeling smothered by the thick, fur-lined cloak wrapped around her shoulders. The grand tent had smelled of dead things: wilting flowers, severed from their roots and hung from the walls in a grim mockery of Aktoli fashion, and the flesh of the animals whose fur scratched at her skin, laid out as if their desecrated bodies were a feast rather than the remains of a slaughter.

While her mother exchanged pleasantries with the Dzeurin leader and Kazima tried to hide her nausea at the scent of charred flesh, her sibling Kazhe made faces at a slim Dzeurin girl with sharp, black eyes nestled beneath epicanthic folds and paler skin than any Aktoli. The girl stared disdainfully at Kazhe's grimaces, but the way she shifted her weight from side to side made her look as uncomfortable as Kazima felt.

That was the first time Kazima had seen Tsan, now the youngest leader of the Dzeurin tribes, renowned for not only her skill with bow and whip, but also her steadfast dedication to her tribes and lack of mercy to their enemies.

The second time Kazima would meet Tsan would be the following day, when she would face her on the field of war as the ruler of Aktol.

Kazima regarded her thorn blade, now shiny from the thin coating of oil. Carved entirely from red oak, two short, conical blades protruded on opposite sides from where they were nestled behind a small shield. The blades were smooth, but the shield was covered with decorative floral carvings; the outer rim was ringed with flowers in bloom, their stems weaving into the middle of the shield where they met in a tangle of roots. Most thorn blades were carved in one piece, but Kazima's could split into two sections with a twist of her hand at the place where the thorns met the shield, separating into a double-sided blade and a shield and allowing for two-handed combat.

The weapon was beautiful, to be sure, but impractical for use in war. The thorns were only sharp at the tip, making the blade ill-suited for anything other than stabbing, and the shield, while light and maneuverable, was too compact to provide much cover, especially from a long and flexible weapon like Tsan's whip.

More important than the weapon itself was the fact that Kazima was not a warrior. As a princess she had learned the way of the thorn blade, but Aktol had not gone to war in many

cycles, and the use of the blade had fallen into the realm of art, more reminiscent of ceremonial dancing than violent combat.

In fact, Kazima had never imagined that she would have to wield the blade in violence until Tsan had sent a message to Aktol requesting permission to divert the Mulofi River, which marked the border of their lands, into Dzeurin territory. When Kazima had refused, Tsan sent a declaration of war by way of the Keeper of the River. From then on, there had been no choice. Neither Aktol nor Dzeurin could refuse an edict from the Keeper.

Kazima walked out into the central gardens of the royal complex, placing the pieces of her weapon on one of the flat rocks surrounding a small pond to bake in the sun, turning the oil into strengthening varnish. She sat on another rock, watching the ripples in the pond and reflecting on the value of water. Aktol was a thriving society, with flourishing garden cities blooming along the west bank of the Mulofi. For many cycles, the Aktoli had not known scarcity of sustenance, peace, or beauty. But gardens need water, and without the waters of the Mulofi, the cities and their people alike would wither and dry up in the sun.

Kazima heard soft footsteps on the gravel path and turned to see Niketa approaching. Niketa's soft waves of long black hair framed a strong, square face, hooded brown eyes offset by skin the color of clay soil, lighter and warmer than the Kazima's own skin, which was the rich, dark color of loam, a trait shared by the Aktoli ruling line. Kazima knew Niketa's face better than she knew her own, but she could not read Niketa's expression as she approached.

"Kazima," Niketa said, sitting down beside her, "are you prepared for tomorrow?"

Kazima smiled wryly. "Not in the slightest, but I fear that there is nothing I can do in this short a time except ensure my blade does not break when I am defeated. We grow where we are planted, and Tsan has lived a warrior's life, while I know only beauty and light."

"So you are resigned to losing before the battle has even begun?" Niketa asked, using the voice that Kazima knew from experience signified disapproval.

"What else can I be, Niketa? My only consolation is that we do not live in the olden days where war was fought to the death, so I will be able to guide my people through the effects of my loss. The river cannot be diverted in a day, so we shall have time to prepare. Once this war business is settled, you and I must discuss how to protect our land from drought and famine."

Niketa did not respond for several moments, staring fixedly at the reeds swaying in the wind beside the water. Finally, she said, "There may be another way."

"Another way?" Kazima looked at Niketa, noting the stiff way she held her neck.

Niketa turned to meet her gaze. "The apothecaries have created a potion. It will enhance your mind and body, giving you strength and speed enough to have a chance of victory," Niketa

took a deep breath, “but it will put such a strain on your body that you may not survive to the following moonbloom.”

Kazima took in the information, trying to incorporate this new possibility into her expectations for the future. “Is that not forbidden? The Keeper will hold us to the rules set out by *The Seeds of War*, which state that it is dishonorable to bring potions into the theater of war.”

“You do not need to remind me of our sacred books,” Niketa said, “I have studied them far more thoroughly than you. *The Seeds of War* also says, ‘Every plant has adaptations to help it survive, be it through thorns, poison, or infectious spores. Nothing 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. Besides,” she added, “you would take the potion before you enter the theater of war.”

“It would still be dishonorable,” Kazima said.

“Yes,” Niketa agreed, “you face a choice between honor and survival.”

“As well as a choice between my own survival and that of my people.”

“It is not a certainty that you will die if you use it,” Niketa said, looking away, “nor is it a certainty that if the river is diverted, we will face drought. We may find another solution yet. You do not have to risk your life in this way. No one will think less of you for choosing to live and guide us through these trials.”

“The choice to save oneself at the expense of one’s people is its own kind of dishonor,” Kazima said, tightness rising in her chest. “I would not blame you for thinking less of me for making that choice.”

Niketa turned back towards Kazima. “I would never think less of you,” she said, with quiet intensity.

Kazima laid her hand on Niketa’s shoulder, feeling the tension in her muscles. “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, squeezing lightly. “What do you advise?”

“I cannot.” Niketa shook her head. “Kazima, in this I cannot be both advisor and friend.”

Kazima pulled her hand back, surprised by the emotion evident on Niketa's face. Despite the scrutiny she had endured for years as Kazima's advisor for things like her uncertain ancestry, her ruthless practicality, or her childhood without a mother, she had always remained outwardly unflappable.

Although seeing Niketa visibly distressed felt even more ill-fitting than the idea of going to war, Kazima knew what she had to do.

"I will take the potion," Kazima said, carefully keeping her expression neutral. "I must."

Kazima watched Niketa's face twitch briefly before settling into the impassive mask she wore at council meetings. She ached to reach out to her advisor, her friend, but she kept her hands by her sides.

"I knew you would," Niketa said slowly, voice betraying nothing.

Kazima's chest tightened. She was unsure if she had been hoping for Niketa to approve of her decision or to try to change her mind, but this quiet resignation was worse than either option. Stoic, restrained Niketa lived only in the council chambers and other public theaters; the real Niketa, Kazima's Niketa, was never hesitant to speak her mind when they were alone.

"I will formalize arrangements to ensure Kazhe is named as my heir, with the condition that you stay on as their primary advisor. I believe they can grow to be a capable ruler, but they never expected to take the seat at this young an age, if at all. They will need your guidance," Kazima said.

"Yes, my lady," Niketa replied.

"You must inform Kazhe that their first priority should be to seek an auxiliary source of water. Even if we do not lose the Mulofi this time, the Dzeurin will certainly declare war again once the time of peace has elapsed, and Kazhe is no more a warrior than I."

"Of course, my lady."

"Niketa." Kazima reached out to take Niketa's hand, the softness of the gesture at odds with the frustration that she couldn't keep out of her voice. "You have not spoken to me like this in many cycles. Like we are bound only by duty."

Niketa squeezed Kazima's hand fiercely. Her voice wavered ever so slightly as she replied, "I have considered scores of situations that we might have to face together, but I never expected to lose you this early."

Kazima pushed down the guilt that twisted in her stomach as quickly as it arose, squashing along with it the tiny, shameful part of her that was pleased to be the cause of

Niketa's uncharacteristic emotion. She gently touched her forehead to Niketa's. Niketa's skin was as soft as she had imagined in the times where she had idly studied her advisor, admiring her poise during painfully long council meetings and formal ceremonies.

"Nor did I," Kazima said, "but I suppose this is what it means to lead."

"And I suppose this is what it means to serve," Niketa said.

"It is as we promised at our ascension ceremony, all that we do must be in service of Aktol," Kazima said, remembering how young she had been at the time, and how little she had truly understood the oath she had sworn.

"Aktol..." Niketa pulled her forehead back, giving a tiny shake of her head as if to clear it. "Yes, all that I do is in service of...Aktol."

Niketa stood up, grabbing Kazima's other hand and pulling her to her feet. "We have much to do before tomorrow."

"Thank you, Niketa," Kazima said, comforted by the familiarity of Niketa reminding her to focus on practical matters. "You always help me center what is truly important."

"It is nothing more than my duty as your advisor," Niketa continued speaking, cutting off the protest that was already rising in Kazima's throat, "and as your friend."

Niketa started to turn and walk away, but Kazima grasped her hands tighter, pulling her back until they were face to face. Kazima wasn't sure exactly why she had not let Niketa leave, other than that she wanted to spend a little longer in her presence. Even when facing war and death, Niketa made her feel at peace.

"Niketa," Kazima said, "will you stay with me after the battle? I would like to have my friend beside me as I face whatever may come to pass."

"I will be there until the end, and for whatever comes after," Niketa promised, chin tilted up to meet the taller woman's gaze.

Satisfied, Kazima released her grip on Niketa's hands and let her walk away, disappearing along the winding path that weaved between beds of flowers as tall as a grown man.

*Tomorrow, I will go to war.* Kazima brought the thought back, examined it again as she tested the varnish on her thorn blade with a tap of her finger. The idea still felt ill-fitting, but only due to its incompleteness.

As she gathered up the pieces of her weapon, Kazima tried a new thought on. *Tomorrow, I will die for my country.* This notion settled over her, draping itself gently over her shoulders like the airy cotton tunic she wore on informal occasions. It fit perfectly.