

For the past three nights in a row, she had been violently ill. Her forehead gleamed with sweat and she was unable to sleep through the nights. Dark circles rimmed her eyes, and she always looked like she was drifting on the edge of slumber.

Zhana was playing a dangerous game. Her father's kingdom had been at odds with its neighbors for nearly a century before she inherited it. Threats had been waged, and deals had been dismissed countless times. Before, their neighbors had never been so desperate. They didn't need her kingdom- they just wanted to expand. But in the months since the drought had started, they had grown restless for supplies that had become far too scarce.

Maybe she would have been able to take on one of them. Her father had been preparing his armies for years in the likely case of a war. But they were not strong enough to take on two threats at once. If she turned to defend herself from the left, the right would strike her down. And if she stood her forces against the right, then the left would swoop in with ease.

"You're looking a bit under the weather, princess."

Zhana lifted her head slightly, turning it to glare at the boisterous girl sitting on the railing of the next balcony over. The girl gave her a bright smile.

"You should get down, Nyx. You could fall. It would kill you."

Nyx leaned out to look down at the dying gardens below her and shrugged. "It's only a few hundred feet. I'm sure I'll be fine." She tilted her head at Zhana. "I'm more worried about *you*, princess. You're paler than your bedsheets, and you haven't left the palace in weeks. You need some fresh air, and your window really doesn't count."

"You know I'm not the princess anymore, Nyx. I'm the queen now. And I don't have time to get some 'fresh air'. I don't have *time* to leave the palace and galavant around the woods with you anymore. The Vynes have been closing in on our western rivers for the past two weeks, and the Glorians haven't stopped sending cryptic threats since my father died. I mean, what does 'Shall your numbered days blur into anxious ignorance as our wolves hunt down your trespassing flocks,' even mean?!"

"I think it means they want to kill us, Zhana."

"Well, OBVIOUSLY!"

The queen slammed her windows shut so hard that the glass trembled with the threat of breaking. Her frustrated sigh was almost as loud, and she sank to her knees with her head in her hands. Her skull throbbed painfully, and her stomach twisted with the threat of a repeat appearance of her supper.

A few minutes later, Nyx knocked on her door. "Go away!" Shouted the queen. "I can't talk to you! I need to think! Maybe if I... maybe if we focus on the Vynes first..."

The door swung open without her consent, and the golden haired girl flowed in like a lively river. Her hand closed around Zhana's elbow and, before she could protest, the queen was being dragged out of her chambers.

"Let- get your hands off of me right now! I'm the queen, you know. *Your* queen! You could be in so much trouble if you- I said, *let go!*"

"Sorry, Zhana, but this will be good for you. I promise. Foyo thinks so too, and he agreed to attend the meetings on your behalf. He's got a lot more experience than you do, you know. With the whole stress thing, at least. I think. He's not quite as good with people, but he's getting there. He'll be there eventually."

Nyx led Zhana through the maze-like halls of the palace, the queen almost having to lean against her as her emotions tore her into a million separate directions.

"Nyx, this isn't going to help at all. What I *need* to do is think. What I *need* to do is plan. What I *need* to do is-

She paused, blinking in surprise. She had been so engrossed in trying to convince the soldier of her point, that she had not even stopped to notice that Nyx had brought her down into the gardens.

"Everything's dead here, Nyx," she muttered as the blonde girl crouched down to smell a shriveled up flower. "There's hardly enough water to keep up with crop production. We couldn't spare any on some frivolous decorations."

"They're not all dead," Nyx replied. The sunlight caught on the gold in her emerald eyes as she flashed Zhana with another winning smile. "You're not looking hard enough. You're just seeing what you want to see. This place is in shambles, because you think it is. But it's not as bad as it looks. Go on, look. Something is still alive."

Zhana rolled her eyes at the soldier. "Nothing could survive weeks without water. Not even the Vynes' dromedaries can do that, and survival is their major selling point."

Nyx chuckled and stood up, motioning towards a tangle of overgrown death. "Check over there, *princess*."

"I am your *queen*, and I take orders from nobody. I'm going back inside the palace. It feels strange out here. And I need to be planning. Our enemies could be storming our borders any minute, and you would have me poking around the royal gardens? I could have sworn you had your own work to do."

Nyx studied her for a moment, as though she could see through every word that Zhana had said and was studying her very core. Then, she shrugged and walked away. "Your loss, princess!" she called over her shoulder. The light caught on her pauldrons and shone into the queen's eyes, making them water and forcing her to look away until Nyx was gone.

"What does she know? Stupid, no good..." she shook her head with a grunt of annoyance, rubbing at the reflex tears. "I can't just sit around in some garden. We could be at the verge of war! I mean, what was she even smelling anyways? Everything around here is stupid and dead, and none of it is going to help me!"

She shoved the toe of her foot hard into the dirt, turning over some of the dead plants and exposing their shriveled roots. Dead, that's what they all were. That's all that her people would be, if she couldn't find a solution. It's what she would be, if she couldn't just be a better leader.

Suddenly, her foot caught on something stronger and she tripped directly into a patch of lavender plants. The petals swirled around her and into the air, mimicking a gentle purple snowfall as the smell hit her nose- fainter than usual, but still very much alive.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed there, laying in the lavender bed. But as she remained still, the sky above her slowly lost its light and melted into the color of blood before finally lighting up again from a thousand stars over her head. The throbbing headache had slowly seeped away and, for the first time in weeks, she calmed down enough to stop thinking about the impending doom on her kingdom. She forgot about the pressure the Vynes were pressing from the west, or the nerve-wracking notes that the Glorians were sending from the east. She forgot about the countless meetings that her war generals were holding daily,

remembering again and again how they did not have the resources to take on a double invasion. She forgot about the drought that was hitting her neighboring countries so much harder than her own that they were pulling their long-threatened swords out of their sheaths and pointing them at her territory. She even forgot about-

That was it!

The drought. Her kingdom was nestled between two deep river systems that had kept the ground around them moist enough to continue food production even when their enemies were struggling, especially the Glorians. Most of the crops that *they* grew were water-greedy, and were dying quickly in the drought. Their leaders had to come up with some way to feed their starving people. And invading Zhana's land for its resources would seem like the only option they had. Except that Zhana knew something they didn't.

She ran faster than she remembered running before, swerving around palace servants and guards alike. The meeting chamber had always seemed so far away, but in only a few minutes she was flinging the doors wide open.

Foyo was sitting near her, looking exhausted and half dead inside. The other advisors and war generals didn't look much better. They had been sitting in that room all day and still didn't have a clue how to stop the impending doom.

The moment that the door opened, all twenty three heads swiveled her way. Nobody dared say a word from the look on her face.

"General Einhaur, call back your troops. I know how to win this."