

14 years prior. Escer 28. 1318 DA. Arviat, sister capital of the Ilukar Domains, western Lorrann.

Steady snowfall finally broke the midday stillness hanging over the reservoir. Kera sat cross-legged on a covered stone platform jutting towards the murky waters, a heavy silk-lined woolen cloak draped over her frame. Winter in the Ilukar Domains often settled into an uneasy gray quiet, positioned on a knife's edge between calm and sudden fury. The reservoir, located below the lowest level of the city and surrounded on three sides by the sheer icy cliffs of the Temitt Mountains, was at least thankfully out of the full breadth of the gales that often pounded on the lofty towers back in the palace. A vellum-bound tome rested open on a portable lectern in front of her, cryptic runes running top to bottom. Kera traced each of the runes with a gloved finger, mouthing every rise and fall as the shape in turn determined her intonation. There was power in these words, a tangible, dangerous power that permeated each syllable as they rolled off of Kera's lips into the frigid air.

The iron braziers lining the platform's edge cast dancing shadows amidst the fallen snow, which had now risen into a small drift behind where Kera sat. She had practiced each of the runes multiple times since today's training began.

"Repetition is the gateway to mastery. Innate knowledge does not exist, outside of knowing how to shit and knowing how to eat. And some don't even get that right."

Kera could hear the exact tone Archmancer Jammut would use to emphasize the last bit. It was always like the old mage to hide a message within a joke. But Jammut was gone at the moment, across the sea back in Frosjholm on business for her mother. She would have to hold herself accountable for the time being.

She returned to the first string of runes. "Ve hum ve suy. See light see shadow. Met e tei. Give and take." *Take and give.* Jammut often would have Kera repeat these runes for hours on end, memorizing the form and movement required to perfectly follow the twisted shape of each rune, every sound informed by the position of her tongue and the shape of her mouth. Early last month he requested she imitate the shape and movement with her hands as well, turning what was a verbal dance into a full-body expression.

As Kera ran through these motions, a recent lesson came to mind, the words clear as if the old mage were seated next to her.

"You must remain ever consistent with this following thought, Kera my dear: equivalence is the center of all things, magic notwithstanding. Give and take. To give life one must take from somewhere else. To take life one must give something in return. All things have a source, as well as a destination. A Pyromancer may produce a magnificent font of blazing flame on what seems to be a whim, but do not neglect to recognize that

this flame requires an origin."

Kera was now standing, hands clenched close to her body, then opened and stretched out and towards the burning braziers. "Met e tei." She repeated the motion, each time reiterating the same form. The fire in one brazier was receding, whilst its neighbor was burning hotter and brighter, flames now reaching up the stone pillar of the platform towards the roof. "Met e tei. Met e t--"

A ball of icy snow pummeled into the back of Kera's head, knocking her off balance. She went sprawling forward between the two braziers and off the side of the platform, landing in a snowy heap.

"I was trying for the brazier". Kera's elder brother Ammat stepped up onto the platform, playfully tossing another snowball from hand to hand. "Mother is right, I need to work on my aim."

Kera stood up, brushing the snow from her robes. The braziers had returned to their normal heights. "Sod it, Ammat, you're lucky I haven't turned those flames against you." She went to collect the tome, which had thankfully remained unwetted by the exploding ball of slush. "Jammut would be very upset to hear you've disrupted my training."

"What the old man doesn't know can't hurt me." Ammat had a playful tone, a cheeky grin lighting up his steely gray face, silver hair tied into a thick top knot. "Besides, training is over for today. Mother sent me to get you. Seems an ambassador is arriving from the Holy Kingdom and we're to join the welcoming party."

An ambassador from Lorram? Perhaps King Davios still seeks a marriage of state. The princess must be around betrothal age by now, around the same age as Ammat... Kera looked at Ammat, a smirk now also playing on her own lips as she tucked the tome under her arm. "Well, what are we waiting for, dear brother? Let us go."

The path leading up the slope from the reservoir to the Silver Palace was steep, a back-and-forth jumble of icy stone walkways and staircases snaking up the lower cliffs of Arviat and directly into the palace courtyard. Kera let Ammat lead the way, carefully following his lead to avoid any perceivable slips or icy patches.

"Mother suggests we make it a point to be extra gracious towards our visitors today. Seems the King's ambassadors have been in all manner of disarray during recent summits, especially when it comes to matters of the alliance." Ammat had a look on his face somewhere between amusement and irritation. "I for one refuse to understand why we find ourselves constantly groveling to these imperials. They offer little and in turn get nothing from us." He stopped for a moment, his gaze fixed on the tall peaks to the east and a wide, raised stone road that cut a swath directly through them, connecting Arviat to the rest of Lorram.

Despite the weather, a few cloaked riders could be spotted against the barren white of the snow, heading westward away from the city.

"I shouldn't have interrupted your practice that way. With the iceball. I know how much work you have been putting into training. What you have accomplished with the Archmancer already, your immediate understanding of the forms and equivalence... you are gifted."

"Come off it Ammat, what is it you want out of me?" The young elf was not known for sentimentality, and certainly not unprompted. "Looking for a character reference for the Epoch Order? You're a prince, you probably don't need one."

"I mean it, Kera. Mother says as much as well. She says you remind her of father during his own apprenticeship with Jammut. Since the Archmancer went overseas it seems you've become the sole topic of conversation amongst the Elder Court in Frosjholm." Ammat had a melancholy smile on his face.

Why is he saying this? I'm not like father, not in that way. I am certainly not nearly as gifted, or driven. I'm doing this because I need to, Ammat. The two stood on the landing in silence, snow flakes dancing down past their cold cheeks. The landing was carved directly from the cliff-face and ornamented with an elaborate silver-plated relief that rose up nearly fifteen feet over the siblings, depicting several Matriarchs from one of the old dynasties. *Beautiful, but needlessly ornate given how rarely anyone comes this way. I suppose I don't mind visiting them on my way down to lessons, though.* Ammat broke the silence.

"You do know I... You're really special Kera, and our family really depends on you." He was still looking away into the distance. Some snow had started to pile on his cloaked shoulders. "When father... when he left, the final time, I watched him go from this exact spot. It wasn't snowing, or windy. The sun was out, early morning. You went down to the city gates with mother and her retainers to see them off, each of you clutching a single silver lily. I wouldn't go."

"I think I remember the day, it was early Opuran. The mountain doves had just returned." *I thought he was with us? Gods, we were so young. I wouldn't have been all too much older than Corylis is now.*

"I thought if I wasn't there, if I simply didn't watch the warriors go, that maybe it wouldn't actually happen. Maybe father would stay with us. It was foolish. He didn't have a choice." His voice wavered. Ammat closed his eyes and took a few long breaths, then brushed off his snowy coat and turned towards his sister. "We both know what the Holy Kingdom seeks with this sudden visit. And we know mother will not refuse. They will summon our family to Catron, and when you return here with mother and Corylis, I will not be returning with you."

"Ammat..." Guilt settled in her throat. Behind the resignation in his eyes, Kera

glimpsed something fiercer buried beneath - a fire that worried her.

"Whatever comes, whatever we must face, we support one another. No matter our place in the games of others." That fire flared, then faltered.

"Mother would never allow it. You are the first born, heir by birthright. I cannot see her throwing you to the wind for political posturing!" Indignation reared in her voice. "Your place is here. With me, and mother, and Corylis. That can't change..."

Ammat took his sister by the hands, callused skin gripping tightly to her gloved fingers. *He looks a lot more like how I remember father looked.* "Things always change, Kera."

Kera could feel her heart in her throat. High overhead a pair of snow hawks circled one another gracefully, riding the gale winds upward towards the tallest cloud-touched peaks. Kera looked out towards the mountains, still tightly clasping Ammat's cold hands. The falling snow had quickened, stark white sky now indistinguishable from the ground below. She could no longer make out the mountain road, the riders lost to the flurries as they made their march into the far tundra.

"Sister." Ammat shook Kera's hand gently. "We should return to the palace. Get ready for our visitors." His face was resolute. *Just a moment more. The snow is beautiful from here...* Ammat released his grip, and was turning towards the stair, upwards towards the palace and what waited for them there. *What waits to break us further.*

Corylis was outside in the courtyard when Ammat and Kera reached the top of the reservoir stair, rolling a small ball of snow across the marble walkway. When it reached a suitable size, she muttered under her breath, "Ful met", and the ball launched forward and out of the courtyard as if kicked by a giant, down into the city proper below. *Without any source. How do you do it, Corylis?*

"That's brilliant Corylis, what did you aim for?" Ammat was grinning, for a moment the Holy Kingdom forgotten.

"The big tower. I missed it." The young girl was staring astutely out towards the Scrying Tower of Domoline. "I think it hit a wagon." She was thumbing her chin pensively, her bone-white hair in braided pigtailed that danced in the breeze. "I need to aim above the tower."

"Next time, Corylis." Ammat stymied a chuckle. "We have important royalty business to attend to. I'm sure mother has already called for you."

"Neven came out and told me to wash up, but I forgot a little bit." She was pulling off her mittens, shaking them in the air like a small bird bathing in a pool of water. "Mittens are wet. Cold and wet."

"Give them to me, and take my hand." Kera reached down and grabbed her

little sister by the hand, placing the soggy mittens in her satchel. The cold little fingers fit snugly in her palm. "We can stop by the kitchen on the way up the tower. See if Essele has anything warm. Maybe sweet, too."

"Sugar rolls!" The young girls attention quickly snapped away from the problem of the snowball-struck-market, the potential of sweets already seen as a promise. *Gods help Jammut, and any other teacher who contends for this one's attention. The idea of a treat and the outside world ceases to exist for her.* Corylis was eagerly watching Kera, her eyes pleading for the trip to the kitchen to pick up the pace.

"Mother said to join her in the west hall, and to clean up first. She wants you both to wear something formal." Ammat was looking up at the polished granite arch leading into the rear hall of the palace, ancestral carvings of cold-eyed faces lining its columns and veined with silver. "Be ready in an hour. And bring me a sugar roll." He attempted a smile at them, then headed inside. *That glint of fire is still in his eyes.*

"Come along. Let's get you cleaned up before Neven sees those wet sleeves." Kera squeezed the mitten-less hand. It was already starting to warm up.

The Silver Needle was the shortest of the three spires jutting from the central hall of the palace, flanked on each side by the twin Founders Towers. Carved of ivory marble and built two centuries after the twins, the Needle shone like a beacon under daylight, sending patterns of refracted light onto her neighbors which in turn accentuated their own ornamentation; hundreds of cast silver gryphons lining the towers from base to apex.

Kera led her sister up a narrow wall-stair leading to the Needle's upper chambers, where hers and Corylis's quarters were, as well as Tutor Neven's. Corylis clutched fixedly to a small platter of spiral shaped pastries, dusted in a fine powdered sugar that was also coating her face.

"Do you think the king will be at the royalty business?" Corylis barely got the words out between bites of pastry.

The king that is going to take our brother away? He wouldn't have the decency to come here and do it himself.

"I don't think so. I'm sure he has very important duties to attend in Catron." She bit back her venom. *She does not need to see hatred. Not from me.* "And you best hope he isn't attending if you're going to speak with food in your mouth."

The doors to their living quarters ringed an open landing at the end of the staircase, plushly upholstered furniture framing a smoldering fireplace. Neven was seated in one of the large down filled chairs directly next to the fire, carefully

sewing a small pair of trousers, aged fingers expertly navigating a worn set of ivory sharps. Her hair was braided and kept high on her head in a tight bun, half spectacles framing sky blue eyes. When she noticed the girls, she stopped sewing and stood up, hurrying over towards them.

“Come come, Corylis, your mother wants you clean as a whistle. Hear now, let me see those.” Corylis paused apprehensively, holding back the plate of miniature treasures. “We haven’t time dear, come along!” Neven placed a hand on the girl’s head affectionately and ushered her across the room towards her bedroom.

“I’ll see you downstairs for the royalty business, Kera!” She was already through the threshold, happily skipping ahead of Neven. “Thank you for trying to keep her wrangled, dear. I do my best but these old bones creak in the winters. She’s more a handful than you ever were. Nearly as bad as your brother.” Neven smiled lovingly at Kera, then followed after the five year old. Kera could already hear splashing from the back of the room as the old woman shut the door behind her.

The fire was crackling in the hearth around several bronze censers, the incense within a sharp, spiced scent reminiscent of clove or cinnamon. *Ember-bark, Ammat’s favorite. He likely collected it himself on his last ranging.* Her brother’s warning from earlier rose alongside the swaying spiced smoke. “*Things always change, Kera.*” She hurried into her own room on the far side of the landing, shutting the door behind her.

High shelves filled with leather wrapped tomes and stacked scrolls lined the left wall, the far side of the room dominated by three massive lancet windows looking out towards the reservoir. An intricately carved four-post bed sat against the right wall, covered in a heavy indigo canopy. The last coals were burning in a cast-iron heating stove at the foot of the bed, where Kera placed her sister’s soggy mittens before throwing herself onto the center of the plush mattress. Outside the wind whipped tendrils of icy snow in cyclones around the tower, mournfully droning through the stone walls.

Kera closed her eyes and focused on each hurried breath passing out of her lungs. She tightened her hands into fists, and began to mouth softly in Ruenic. “Tsu.” A breath in. “Rem.” The release out. She continued the pattern, the words now measures of time outside of the passing of other things. The bed fell away first, then the tower. At last the winter itself fell away, and she was the nowhere that was also everywhere, the space between that connected all things, that-

A blasted trumpet broke the stillness, sending Kera shooting up from the bed, her heart racing. *That was from the courtyard. The ambassador party must have arrived.* She moved to the nearest window and looked down into the courtyard,

obscured somewhat by the swirling snow. Fuiring, her mother's chancellor, was standing on the palace stair flanked by Captain Morvaine and three members of the palace guard, their silver armor and ornate helms wet with snow. The chancellor was gesturing towards a thin cloaked figure, behind whom twenty armored men stood at attention, banner-spears bearing the golden sun of Lorrain clenched tightly in gauntleted fists. The cloaked man was animatedly motioning between Fuiring and the armed men standing under the courtyard pillars.

Kera took her hand and cupped it towards her ear, whispered a rune, "Nu", and focused on conversation. The final embers in the stove were snuffed out, as the voices of the men below were projected into her ear.

"-we accepted the terms of meeting, yes, but to bring a company armed and armored to a council under our own palace roof? We have shown loyalty to King Davios, what gives reason for this?" Fuiring's tone was pointed, but leveled. The second voice was higher, and poised with assurance.

"Your monarch needn't worry, we come merely on terms of negotiation. This is but a small company of the king's own 1st Battalion, the remainder of whom have remained outside the city gates in accordance with our respectful... relationship with one another."

Kera's heart dropped. *A battalion at the city gates? For a marriage proposal?* The cloaked man was moving up the steps towards the chancellor.

"This council shan't take much time given the circumstance, and your hospitality is duly noted but not necessary. By nightfall we shall return back to our travels, if this meeting goes as expected." He turned his back to Fuiring, addressing the massed soldiers. "Kingkeeper Toorm will accompany me. The rest of you, at ease." The soldiers saluted, then relaxed their stance. A figure Kera had not yet noticed stepped forward from behind one of the pillars, hooded and cloaked, wearing a dark leather gambeson. *The Kingkeeper*. They strode with an assured grace up to the chancellor and bowed slightly. Kera could see they wore a hand-and-a-half sword high on their hip. *The lives that blade must have taken... why are they here?*

Chancellor Fuiring stepped back, gesturing for the two to follow into the grand foyer. "We wish only for a peaceable agreement on the day. Please follow me, Ambassador. Kingkeeper." He gave a courteous nod, then turned towards the entrance. The two visitors hurried after him. *To the meeting chamber. I better change.*

Neven had laid out a soft velvet gown, deep blue and embroidered with silver thread, as well as a light silk cloak-scarf on Kera's dresser. A steady font of steam emanated from the front corner of the room, where a discreet pocket door led into the adjoining washroom. *Neven must have also heated the bath.*

The steamy water resettled her focus. There were herbs infused in the bath, fine perfumes of florals and mint. *I think if they've come with an army then it mustn't be a marriage that is being sought. What would the king want from us that hasn't already been offered throughout this blasted treaty? But if Ammat can stay... then they can take whatever!* There was a light knock outside on the bedroom door. After a moment, Neven poked her head in. "We will head down in a few minutes, Kera, I almost have your sister ready. She protested against the 'poofy, itchy clothes' but I offered her another trip to the kitchen later for sweets."

Kera dried herself with a heating spell at the expense of the remaining heat from the bathtub, leaving the now draining water frigid, and then changed into the prepared outfit. With expert fingers, she quickly tied her hair into an ornate plait, raised in a circular pattern on top of her head like a halo. Lastly, she placed a silver chained amulet around her neck, the centerpiece holding several large, silver-blue gemstones in the shape of a crescent. Kera shut her eyes tightly, pleading quietly. *Father. Ancestors. Please, keep us whole through this ordeal. Give us the fortitude to support one another. Keep our family as one, for loss of all else.* She stood, took one last long look out from the tall windows down towards the reservoir, and headed outside to join Neven and Corylis.

The meeting chamber sat behind the central hall on the far side of the palace, perched like a gargoyle at the edge of a towering precipice rising above the commons district of Arviat, several hundred feet below. Much taller than it was wide, with thick stone pillars holding the tiled roof aloft, the chamber was dominated by an impressive centerpiece: a massive slate table fifty feet long spanning nearly the entire length of the room. It was here where Kera sat nervously, Corylis next to her softly humming, waiting for the arrival of Loril and Ammat.

The ambassador had requested an hour to "refresh" following the "arduous trek through the mountain pass." He was currently recuperating in a private den down the hall, typically reserved for guests of more noble esteem. *I do suppose he is here directly at the behest of the king, as close as many could get to nobility. Still, it seems like he's toying with us in some way. And how arduous could the journey be in an enchanted carriage?*

Tall glasses of crimson wine had been placed at the drawn seats nearest the door, and some small plates of fruit and pastry set upon the table, comically dotting the behemoth like barnacles on a sea titan. Corylis had mustered as much self control as she possibly could in the face of the unattended food. Kera smiled

at her. *She's done well, she only snatched two plates of apple tart.* The young girls brow was straight as a line as she stared longingly at a particularly large citrus cookie.

Kera turned her attention back toward the single other figure currently in the room: a dark-cloaked woman, sharp featured and light skinned, was leaning still as a statue against the wall to the left of the doorway. *Vaela Toorm. She hasn't moved an inch since we sat down.* The Kingkeeper's long sword was barely discernible under her heavy cloak, but for the chape of its scabbard nearly trailing to the floor. Kera's eyes were locked on this point of polished metal. Vaela paid the girls no mind, her hand lazily resting on her chin, eyes shut. *She might as well be asleep, but there is still something alert about her stillness.*

On the staircase down from the Silver Needle, Chancellor Furing had stopped Neven and the girls. He pulled Kera aside, turning away from Neven and Corylis to whisper. "I don't know what they're planning, but just remain calm and keep your sister close." Furing looked back towards the young girl, who was deep in excited chatter and pointing fervently at one of the portraits of a long dead ancestor lining the stairwell wall. Furing held a pained expression. "She is different Kera, we all know this. This makes her an asset to those who do not know the sweet child she is. The Kingkeeper Toorm had already begun asking about her." This warning was still bouncing around Kera's head as she continued to wait for her mother's arrival.

Finally, the door behind them opened, and Furing walked into the room accompanied by Captain Morvaine. They were soon followed by Ammat. *He looks sullen, like a scolded animal. There's no sign of that fire anymore.* He glanced in the direction of the Kingkeeper, who was now standing at a lazy attention, then shuffled past his sisters, taking a seat to the left of the girls.

"Hi Ammat, I got you your sweet roll but it's in my room still." Corylis was sheepishly flitting her fingers. "I also maybe ate a little of it." Ammat either didn't hear the girl, or was choosing to ignore her. His eyes were locked on the Kingkeeper.

"Ammat, what's going on? Where is mother? This doesn't seem right." Kera's voice was muffled, but she couldn't fully hide her concern.

"Please Kera, just wait. And do not speak." His focus was still on Vaela Toorm, though his posture had shifted back. His left hand was now resting at his side, under the table. *His sword hand. Gods, where is mother?*

Corylis' small hand was on Kera's arm, tugging at her gowns flowing sleeve. "Kera, is Ammat mad at me for eating his treat?" She was whispering as best she could. Kera opened her mouth to answer, when the door again swung open, and Queen Loril Nanwen strode into the room. *She looks twice as severe as Ammat.* Her

mother's silver hair was tight and pulled high, falling in an elaborate braid across her shoulder. Her hands were clenched, arms held close against the shimmering dark fabric of her gown. Immediately, she looked towards her daughters. Kera could find no reassurance in her mother's eyes, as they darted between Corylis and herself. *She is afraid.*

Vaela Toorm was now standing next to the table, about ten feet from the family, patiently stretching her hand. Captain Morvaine stepped up, drawing a line between the gathered Queen and the Kingkeeper. *Did she just smirk? Another game?*

"Kingkeeper Vaela Toorm, honored guest." There was no hint of the glimpsed fear in Loril's voice, smooth as ice. "Ambassador Telios requested a brief moment with you before our meeting begins in earnest. If you could please accompany Captain Morvaine, he can show you to the ambassador."

"Of course, your highness." Toorm's voice was affectless, almost seeming sardonic in her lack of inflection. "I'm sure we will be but a moment." She bowed gracefully, then headed out of the chamber, followed by Morvaine.

As the door shut, Loril faced her children. "Each of you, please, show utmost respect to both Ambassador Telios and Kingkeeper Toorm. Treat them as if they were an extension of King Davios himself, while they are under our roof." Her eyes went directly to Ammat. "I need you to do this."

"Why are they here, mother? Did they send any word beforehand?" Kera could not hide her flustered state. *My hands are shaking.*

Loril's attention stayed on Ammat for a moment, then she turned towards her eldest daughter and knelt closer to meet Kera's eye level. "No word was sent ahead, until an hour or so before their arrival. It seems that King Davios has caught us unawares." A sad smile crept onto her face, and she took Kera by the hands. "Ammat tells me your studying went very well today. Perhaps my brilliant daughter has a future in thermomancy?" Loril spent a long moment looking at her, hands clasped like a vice around Kera's, and then her expression hardened and she released her grip.

"Mama, Kera got me some sweets but I only ate a little bit, so Neven says maybe I can have another after the meeting? But I'm kinda full now. Is that sword lady the king?" Corylis could not contain her excitement any longer. The queen placed her hand on the little cheek and gently kissed her on the forehead. "We will see, Tutor Neven knows best. For now, please be a good model princess." Corylis nodded, then did her best to straighten her posture. Kera caught her shooting a nervous glance towards Ammat, who was staring at the falling snow outside.

"Silver-queen, I believe Captain Morvaine is returning with our guests."

Fuiring was peering through the entryway out into the long hallway beyond. Loril brushed her hands down the front of her gown, searching for any missed creases or bunched fabric, then made her way over to the door. *She stands as if the kings of a thousand empires are about to pass through those doors...* A silent moment passed, and then a rapt knock. The door opened, and Captain Morvaine entered bowing to Loril, moving to stand at attention behind the girls. He was followed by the skinny man Kera had watched arrive in the courtyard, and then finally, Kingkeeper Toorm. Kera could now see that Telios, now uncloaked, was shaved near-bald as marble and wore the high collar and golden chain of an Abbot Solaris.

"Ambassador Telios, it is our pleasure to welcome you under the roof of the Silver Palace." The queen offered her hand to the man. *But not bowing, Never bow to someone sent on the behalf of another.*

"You have been both gracious and accommodating on such a regrettably short notice." Telios took the queen by the hand, genuflecting stiffly. "King Davios offers apologies, the expansion of the Holy Will into Jel'ak has taken it's toll, with the loss of the prince."

Kera could see surprise on her mother's face for a quick moment. *Which prince? The eldest was four or five years Ammat's senior. Rerios. Is the Holy Kingdom at war?* Loril mouthed the Ruenic word for solace, looking back towards the Kingkeeper. "May his soul find refuge. Our condolences thousand-fold." Vaela gave no hint of recognition, and moved to the far wall nearest the ambassador's designated seat.

"He was a selfless warrior, and a genuine soul. All of Lorrarn should grieve alongside our people." Telios followed the Kingkeeper, taking his seat across from Loril's ornately carved, high backed chair. "We will make your kindness known to the King." The ambassador attempted a strange smile, eyes shifting between Loril and her daughters. "We hope perhaps this kindness can extend in more... tangible ways."

Fuiring shifted next to the queen, wooden chair legs scraping against the marble floor. "Yes, yes, Telios, surely there is pretense for this meeting beyond this tragic news. What else is it that your king seeks in Iluk-domain?"

The ambassador's eyes darted to Fuiring, as Vaela took a step off the wall. Telios held a hand up, halting her. *That struck a nerve, for a moment his face looked like an apple.* The ambassador sighed, directing that same strange smile toward Fuiring.

"Chancellor, we discussed this on your courtyard steps. Our partnership has done much good for both of our peoples, and we have been nothing but supportive of Ilukar sovereignty." His expression intensified. "However, it seems

you have mistaken the King's generosity for a lack of order. By right these lands still fall under the imperial decree of the Holy Will."

Ammat stood up raging, arm brushing a plate of fruit and sending it flying off of the table. "And by the blade these lands are kept Iluk-domain!" Corylis cowered into Kera's side, Ammat now looming over them.

"Ammat! Harry your tongue and sit down...Now." Queen Loril's command was a whip-crack against the enraged prince. He returned to his chair, eyes fixed to the stone table. "My son does not know his place. Ambassador, please forgive this outburst."

"He is quite the spirited one, isn't he? The bravado of youth can be forgiven." Both Telios and Vaela Toorm were focused on Ammat. *Her hand is in her cloak. Gods, Ammat calm yourself!* "Your son does raise a valid point, though. For centuries these lands have, in fact, been kept by the blade, and thousands of Ilukar have paid this price. Yet now, our kingdoms find themselves allies. Grain grown in the Grescorl Valley feeds mouths in Iluk-lands. Blades forged from Temitt steel win battles on the southern frontlines. We are strong because we work with one another."

"We understand the terms of treaty, we have been living under them a decade." Fuiring was restlessly checking his waistcoat with shaking hands, pulling out a small satchel of packed herbs and Iluk tobacco which he placed in a long bone pipe and lit. A sweet floral smoke rose from the bowl. *That smells like father. If only he were...* Fuiring took a steady toke, his hands ceasing their shaking. "What new terms do you seek? What are you trying to change?"

Telios opened his mouth to speak but paused. The pipe smoke was drifting past his head and towards a barely opened window looking out over the city. "We face dire fortunes in the Jel'ak. The loss of Prince Rerios, failure at the siege of For'cin. King Davios fades between restlessness and melancholy. Our people have been lessened."

"And so we come to this meeting, then? You wish for faster imports, more iron for the foundry and silver for the bank?" Fuiring spoke out of the side of his mouth, the smoldering pipe lightly muffling his voice. "Or is it bodies? Iluk craftsmen to sharpen your blades and stock the forges?"

"Neither, Ambassador, the rate of trade between our domains is sufficient to our needs." *He's guarding something in that statement. Fuiring noticed, I think.* The chancellor was holding the pipe between his lips, arms crossed tightly. Loril was still, hands softly placed on the table in front of her. "You are somewhat correct, though. We have, in fact, come in search of a weapon. Something only you of the great Iluk-domains can grant us, an honest hand extended between allies." *That almost seems sarcastic. Are they still mocking us?*

“We can assure you, both of you, that any weapon held by Ilukar hands is done with the knowledge of the Holy Kingdom, and King Davios. We have withheld nothing, from you, the Kingkeepers, or Davios himself.” Loril held herself like a statue, now noticeably taller than the ambassador. Her eyes met his directly. “We understand we are in no position to play games of subterfuge with those whose might is more desired as an ally, than a foe.”

“There was no accusation made, your highness, you have misunderstood my intent. We don’t suspect you would even recognize what we seek as a weapon, to be truthful.” Telios got up and turned towards the window, running his hand calmly along the sill.

“Ambassador, at this point clarity would best serve all of us.” Loril’s expression remained stagnant, as if she were carved of unwavering stone. “If you seek something from us, name it plainly.”

Telios turned back from the window wearing the smile of someone who just won a very risky wager. “Of course, your highness, forgive me for my...circumspection.” He returned to the table, the strange smile still coyly held on his face. *He thinks he’s in control here. I do not like this man.*

“King Davios has heard reports. Curious reports, indeed.” The last word hung in the air for a moment. Telios took a swig of wine, blood red spillage dribbling down his thin lips, then continued. “It seems remarkable happenings have been taking place here in Arviat. Beneath the roof of this very palace, even.” His eyes pointedly passed first to Corylis, who was watching Ammat with a fearful countenance, and then next to Kera. A shiver ran through her. “This has perked the kings ears, he’s practically obsessing over the...potential of it all.”

Fuiring rose from his chair, spilling ash onto the table from the smoldering pipe. “Telios you must truly have no understanding of what it is you ask? The treachery...”

“We know precisely what we ask. And we know you will undoubtedly oblige. Queen?”

Kera looked at her mother. She had finally faltered, eyes clasped shut as if closing them could make the ambassador disappear. “Telios, please...surely...”

“Surely you understand the gravity of our situation? In war, especially one as...irregular as our campaign in Je’lak, all advantages must be accounted for. It just so happens we have identified a clear advantage here in this house. Your daughters are incredibly gifted, as we have heard.” *Mother. Gods no, mother tell him no.* Loril’s eyes were still shut, hands clasped like a taloned bird. “I can assure you, they will want for nothing through the training, treated still as princesses ought to be.”

Corylis shrieked, and there was a crash to Kera’s left, an empty chair toppling

backwards towards the chamber wall. Ammat was nearly airborne, hand clenched tightly to his sword hilt, hurtling towards the ambassador. *Eyes filled with fire.* "Ammat stop!" Kera rose from her chair, as if she could halt her brother with words alone. Others were yelling, and the doors had been flung open behind them, but Kera was focused solely on a responding surge of movement from behind the ambassador, who was still calmly seated as if dining with a friend. Vaela Toorm had launched off of the table to meet the raging prince, blade already poised, eyes fixed hawk-like on her prey. Steel clashed once, ringing through the chamber like clarion bells, and Ammat hit the lip of the table hard and toppled into the wall, sword sent clattering across the marble, his blade hand empty and now hanging limply at the wrist. Before Kera could muster another word, the Kingkeeper was above her brother, blade held at the boy's throat.

The room fell still. A small hand desperately clutched to Kera's sleeve, trembling in time with her own reckless heartbeat. Finally, a cold, rising voice broke the silence. "Remove your blade from my son's throat. Now." The flame-filled silver sconces lining the walls dimmed, as in turn their light was plied away to find itself wrapped around the raised hand of Loril Nanwen. Vaela Toorm's sword arm held steady as her attention sprang to the queen, something feral showing through her poise. *She wants to kill us.* A sconce went dark. Then another. The Kingkeeper took a step from the prince, and lowered her blade, eyes never straying from the queen. A whoosh, and the flames returned to their sconces.

"You did not come here to spill blood, Telios. Yet, neither do you understand the enormity of what you ask." The queen's voice seemed to emit from the stone of the palace itself, smooth and clear. "My son is reckless, headstrong, foolish and, most of all, bitter. But his heart is my heart. What you ask cannot be abided."

Again, the chamber went silent. Breathing heavy, Ammat shuffled back to the table, his sword hand bent awkwardly and held against his body. For the first time Kera noticed the armed Holy Kingdom soldiers that had filed into the room during the commotion, her mother's own guards now surrounding the family in a protective semi-circle.

At last, Ambassador Telios took a sip of wine then spoke, his disposition unchanged. "Disappointing, truly. If that is to be your official response, it shall be made known to King Davios at once. Kingkeeper Toorm, if you could, bring a Telemancer, and a reagent suitable enough to contact both the King and the fleet north of Frosjholm." *They mean to bring their war across the sea, to our people. How...* Telios was already moving towards the soldiers near the door, Vaela following

behind, her sword still in hand.

“This is treason, Telios, this is against the terms signed in blood and ink by your ki—” Furing was still speaking when Vaela’s blade took his forearm at the elbow. Blood mixed with spilled wine as the chancellor flailed backwards towards the guards and Captain Morvaine.

The chamber erupted. Ammat again was on his feet, rushing towards Toorm, before something blasted him sideways and against a stone pillar. Captain Morvaine stood over the bleeding Furing, spearpoint inches from the line of soldiers behind whom Telios was now shielded. The ambassador was shouting something, lost in the chaos. Kera pulled Corylis beneath her and pressed against the table. Above them, Loril was forming scone-fire into a ward, her Ruenic deep and echoing, hands held tightly in a closed circle.

A pop, and the pressure in the room dropped. The line of soldiers were pushed by an unseeable force, several tripping and clattering to the ground. Loril’s ward dropped, extinguished as if by pinched fingers on candle-flame. Kera felt Corylis shudder, then pull into herself, as all eyes turned towards the sisters. Beneath them, the floor was cracking. *She’s doing this. If she doesn’t stop she’s going to kill everyone here.* She shook the girl. A window in the back of the room shattered in reply.

“Corylis, please. You have to stop.” Kera tried to pull her sister closer, tried to shield her from the others. From Telios, and Vaela the Kingkeeper, and King Davios and his supposed Holy Empire. *They will either break us into pieces, or let us be destroyed. They came to take us. To take me.* Corylis wailed, a needle-pointed wail that Kera felt in her teeth. The cracks deepened. *I can end this. I can give them what they came here for.*

Against every instinct telling her to stay small, to huddle close to her sister and hold her away from the world, Kera stood up. She stepped forward and reached for her voice, finding it in the place she kept her mother’s smiling praise when Kera told her about her studies, and where she kept Ammat’s obstinate jests and jokes. Where Corylis’ wide-eyed questions nestled, and her father’s passionate tales of love and honor still lived. Kera opened her mouth.

“I will go—”

“You will take Kera and Kera alone, and you will leave this palace. Now.”

Queen Loril Nanwen’s commandment echoed with finality. Kera’s heartbeat seemed to freeze. *What did she say?* She looked to her mother, but the Queen was facing the ambassador and his soldiers, and Vaela Toorm, who was striding towards Kera. Telios said something to the soldiers, and someone was shouting from the group near where Corylis was huddled, but Kera couldn’t hear the words. *Where is Ammat, he will know? What did mother say?*

A firm hand was on her shoulder, pulling her away from the table where her mother now knelt next to Corylis, and into the mass of waiting soldiers. Pulled away and out from the meeting chamber, from the echoes of the vaulted marble ceilings and the warmth of the constantly roaring stone fireplaces. Kera opened her mouth to ask someone, anyone, what her mother had said, but her siblings were not there, and the soldiers were around her, plus that steady, firm hand was leading her away, out of the Silver Palace and into the cold winter storm.