

Chapter 1

The man's body jerked rigid, standing to attention. His eyes popped wide open, as if he had accidentally walked up to the edge of a cliff and peered over.

For several seconds, the slash across the man's throat seemed not to be there at all. Suddenly, a red gash appeared and a crimson river of blood descended, gushing down the man's neck and spreading over his chest.

The man looked surprised, as if taken unawares. This, despite having known what was about to happen the moment he had seen the Emperor's very slight, exquisitely discrete nod. He had heard the single, quiet step, just behind him, as the Executioner moved forward to deliver the fatal cut.

The Emperor looked directly into the man's eyes. There was no terror. There was no shock. There was no panic. His face expressed only surprise. It was clear that he had expected something.

'What? A miracle?', The Emperor pondered, 'Yes! It was exactly that. He had believed, right to the very last moment, that he would somehow be saved!'

The man's look had turned to one of concentration and the Emperor realised that there was no choking, spluttering or gargling sound from him. None of the sounds of a man drowning in his own blood. Instead, he was carefully and resolutely controlling his breathing.

The Emperor had consigned many people to death, in his time, but few had met death so well. This man had earned his complete respect. The Executioner, as if reading the Emperor's expression, almost imperceptibly raised an eyebrow and inclining his head slightly to one side. The Emperor nodded, with equal subtlety.

In response, with a swift, precise and well-practised movement, the Executioner slipped the blade of a long, thin knife up under the priest's shoulder blade and into his heart.

With a little "whoosh" of exhaled breath, the priest slumped dead onto the stone floor, landing with a slap of bare flesh. A pool of blood began to form beside him.

Kenitra had promised herself that, no matter what happened, she would not cry out or burst into tears. She was an Emperor's daughter and was required to behave with restraint. She was much relieved at her success. Her guts were tight & painful as if somebody had tied a knot in them. It took all her 18 years of resolve to stop her discomfort from showing on her face.

A group of slaves hurried forward and deftly rolled the corpse into a long, scarlet bag of waxed leather. They drew a set of straps together to restrain the contents and pulled cords around the neck of the bag to seal it. Then, in a blur of activity, they quickly spread fine sand over the pool of blood and swept it up into a set of scarlet pouches.

Kenitra wondered if the colour of the sacks was to hide the blood in case it seeped thru into the fabric. She scolded herself for entertaining such a trivial thought as that at such a horrendous moment.

From her vantage point, on the throne next to her father, she watched the body being taken from the chamber. She desperately wanted to lean forward and look to her father's other side, where her two brothers sat, to see the expression on their faces, but stopped herself.

She was tragically aware of the empty seat to her left, where she had always sat until her mother's death, 2 years ago. Now Kenitra sat in her mother's place.

Like Kenitra, her mother had been tall, slim and blonde. The pale blue eyes, they shared, having – she had often been told - a haunting quality about them. Her father said that her mother's eyes had enchanted his soul. At present, Kenitra's focus was fully on keeping her eyes vacant.

This was Kenitra's first appearance at an execution. Although she had been Queen for two years, she had only come of age the previous week. She knew that there would be many eyes upon her. Studying her every facial expression.

There was a saying in Oydrae, across all of its six vast, restless regions, back into the mists of time: 'Hear someone speak and you know half. Hear them speak and watch their face and you know all.'

She wanted to acquit herself well for her own sake, for her father's sake, but – most of all – for her mother's sake. She hoped that her mother would be proud of her. Her mother had *always* been proud, even when she felt she'd not fully deserved it.

She felt a slight twinge. Her eyes stung, threatening a tear. She dismissed her thoughts, driving them away to the back of her mind, as a farm girl might scurry around a yard, with her apron held wide, chasing out straying hens.

'I am an Emperor's daughter!' she scolded herself, 'A queen!'

Kenitra was the Queen of Oydrae. She was not Empress. That was a title reserved for the ruler of the country, themselves, or for the wife of a ruling Emperor. She was Queen. Only two short years ago, her title had been ceremoniously bestowed upon her, with many solemn rituals, with fanfares and

with sharp smelling incense wafting and smoking from pots swung on the ends of chains.

In Oydrae, if an Empress died and she had a daughter, the daughter became Queen Consort to her surviving husband. In the same way, if an Emperor died with a son, the son would become King Consort to their surviving wife.

Her brothers had not been overwhelmed with happiness at her elevation. They had shown neither anger nor hostility, but were clearly not overjoyed. As Queen, her importance was now second only to the Emperor. She would out rank both of her brothers until his death, at which point, her elder brother, as Heir, would become Emperor.

In Oydrae the monarchy was everything. The Royal Family was of critical importance to the whole fabric of society. The empire had been established a thousand years ago, when they had forcibly united ninety different localities into a single territory six states. The rule of the Emperors had endured ever since.

Emperor Kondrat stood up. The whole of the seated crowd immediately got to its feet, in response, arising from endless rows of benches, stretching into the distance down the great hall. Those already stood, briefly lowered their heads in unison.

The Emperor made a gesture with his hand and a group of slaves promptly brought on the royal litter. Four carried it by the shafts in front and four by the shafts behind. Her father climbed aboard and seated himself. Kenitra, as Queen, took her position beside him. Her brothers walked to the rear, giving a very realistic impression that this was their preferred mode of travel.

As the tiny procession moved down the hall, the people they passed bowed their heads. The Emperor sat looking studiously forward, absorbing the reverence of his people while appearing to be aloof from it.

At strategic points, there were soldiers with highly polished shields and helmets, gleaming polished body armour and the turquoise cloaks of the Emperor's Guard. Their hands rested on the hilts of their swords, ready to draw them at the slightest hint of disturbance. Their eyes were vigilant, searching the faces in the crowd. Kenitra knew their alertness to be genuine and their readiness to respond to danger not without cause.

Stood discretely in the alcoves along the wall were the less splendid soldiers of the regular army. They carried swords, spears, axes, shields and spiked clubs. Their armour was clean and well-presented but not gleaming. The occasional minor dent in the odd helmet or breastplate was from combat not long passed. The last uprising, being only a few months ago, was still fresh in their memory.

Major damage to their armour was always skilfully hammered out and made good. Smaller indications of action, however, were often allowed to remain visible. This, it was said, was an act of vanity. They were, after all, "real" soldiers.

As the litter was carried out of the Hall of the Emperors, into the blazing sunshine, a group of other slaves joined the entourage, waving fans and spraying a fine mist of cooling water into the air. Kenitra tilted her head back and closed her eyes, enjoying the chilling effect of the water. As she opened her eyes, she notices that the bodies of the nearest slaves, administering this pleasant luxury, were dripping with rivers of perspiration. Quickly, she wiped the droplets from her face and looked down into her lap in embarrassment.

As they progressed across onto the marble paving of the assembly yard and made their way under the awnings of the Palace Gardens, the fountains and water curtains wafted their welcoming cool draft towards them. The scorching air, clawing at their throats with its parching dryness, relented.

Kenitra looked visibly restored. Her father, forever portraying restraint and composure, allowed himself the merest sigh of satisfaction. The sigh then gave way to the merest hint of a groan as a group of officials began to fan out in front of them as the litter came to rest.

At their head was Callibus. His tall, thin frame and his gleaming bald head made him easy to discern. His expression was earnest, almost tense. Kenitra noticed that he was wearing a thin, blue rope around his neck.

She recalled from her history lessons that, in the old days, a messenger who brought bad news would wear such a rope. Its purpose was very singular. If the news they brought were sufficiently displeasing, the rope could be used to strangle them to vent the recipient's anger.

As he alighted from the litter, Emperor Kondrat spotted the rope, too. Callibus met the Emperor's gaze uncertainly. The Emperor raised his eyebrows and Callibus appeared to immediately lose several inches from his six-foot four inch stature.

Callibus bowed deeply, cutting the air back & forth, horizontally, with his upturned hand in a traditional salutation of reverence. The Emperor curtly splayed his fingers in a downward gesture to curtail Callibus' motions. Callibus, in response, placed one palm on the back of the other in formal display of gratitude. Callibus was a stickler for formality.

Callibus turned to acknowledge Queen Kenitra. Quickly and deftly, Kenitra swooped her hand down, splaying her fingers and Callibus stopped half way through his first slice through the air. Although his eyes remained impassive, a fleeting pursing of the old man's lips, told Kenitra that he was not happy to

have had his salutation cut so very short in this way by such a young a Queen. Callibus lived and breathed tradition.

"Callibus" said Kenitra, straightening herself to stand tall.

Callibus averted his eyes and bowed very low, unsure of the what might follow from being unexpectedly addressed directly by the Emperor's Consort.

"The Queen," she told him, as if speaking of another person, "Thanks the gods that you are a part of her household." Then, as further appeasement added: "You are irreplaceable."

Callibus almost shuddered with pleasure and his already low bow shed yet more altitude. While Callibus was a staunch traditionalist of sober and reserved nature, the act of building him up in front of his peers was a valuable kindness. One of no small political value in the relentless power struggles of court life.

Kenitra followed her father towards his chambers. Callibus tagged along behind, maintaining a slight - but crucial - distance ahead of the small entourage of other officials and attendants who trod in their wake.

At the door to his chambers, two members of the Emperor's Guard, already stood to attention, managed to stand taller still. As the Emperor approached, they quickly stood aside to allow him passage. Pausing at the threshold, the Emperor turned and held up his hand, excluding all those beyond Callibus from following them in. Even with her back to them, Kenitra could feel the palpable disappointment of the rest of their party as they came to a halt.

When the door was closed, Callibus walked to the centre of the room, turned to face the Emperor and slapped his thigh. Kenitra suppressed a smile. Anybody else, when summoning another person to enter, would have clapped their hands. Callibus, however, was Callibus and, starting as a child, she had learned the full repertoire of his quirky habits. A man so constrained and suffocated by tradition clearly needed some small manner of escape from its tedium.

At the back of the chamber a curtain parted and an old woman of impossibly advanced years with dark, heavily wrinkled skin was pushed through ahead of the guard who accompanied her. She stood, silent, looking down at her feet. The guard stepped to one side and a small, wiry elf of a man slipped between them, his beady eyes flitting around the room and from each person to the next.

"Your Excellence," began the diminutive new arrival, bending a low bow towards the Emperor and cutting the air deftly with a hand, "I have need to bring this woman to your presence."

His face contorted in a series of twitches and grimaces as if what he was about to say were painful, "She is from the West." He flinched and his lips quivered as if sucking on something sour as he added: "The *Far West*."

The Emperor looked from Dreadmont's darting little eyes, to the woman, to Callibus and then back to Dreadmont.

Nobody spoke. It was well known that the Far West was a place of extreme peril.

The lands to the West of Oydrae were all troublesome in one way or another. The nearer parts were filled with wild, hairy people of primitive and bestial ways. The Iron Lands of Oydrae, that bordered them, had ditches and stockades to discourage these ape people from straying, but the sheer savagery of the desert, between them, tended to be more than enough containment.

Beyond these lands, in what was often called the "Deep West", there were said to be witches, spellbinders and devil worshippers. Some were rumoured to drink human blood. Others, legend had it, were cannibals and ate the bodies of children that they sacrificed. It was hard to determine which tales were true and which were encouraged in order to spread fear and alarm.

Further still, in the fabled "Far West", lay lands of complete and utter terror. It was there that huge, grotesque creatures roamed. Creatures with terrible, long horns; with spikes along their backs and with massive plates of protective bone along their bodies. Creatures that sported jaws filled with saw-like teeth that could pierce armour. Members of expeditions sent this far were generally never seen again.

Beyond this, off the map as far as the Empire was concerned, lay "The Hollow Lands". Here the deserts stretched endlessly without ceasing. Here, vegetation was almost non-existent. This was where human life petered out and, where scorpions, snakes and beetles reigned. Of the few expeditions sent this distance, they were lucky if even one out of a hundred returned alive.

The woman continued to stand, calmly and silently, not looking up. She was stood in what most would regard as the daunting presence of the mighty Emperor of Oydrae. Despite standing before the most powerful man in any direction for over 5,000 miles, she appeared unconcerned.

The Emperor said nothing.

Dreadmont said nothing.

Callibus said nothing.

Kenitra said nothing.

The guard said nothing.

The silence became overwhelming. Like a physical weight bearing down on the room.

Eventually, the Emperor spoke: "You know who I am, but it seems to give you no cause for concern, old woman."

The old woman slowly looked up, meeting his eyes, unwavering. Her attitude was not defiant and not disrespectful. Nor was it arrogant or challenging.

The Emperor held her gaze with his own, but did not speak.

Dreadmont, unable to contain himself, exploded with indignation: "This man is Emperor! He could have you skinned alive, rolled in salt and cooked on a pole over a fire pit! Then visit the same fate on every member of your family that draws breath!"

The Emperor raised his hand to silence the outburst.

The old woman raised her palm upwards and cut the air, left to right, several times, in a slow and deliberate gesture to the Emperor. The look the old woman gave Dreadmont was completely blank and without emotion. She seemed weary to her bones.

Addressing the Emperor, she said: "I should be dead a hundred times over. I have escaped death so often, it feels almost like a companion." She sighed a long sigh, then continued: "Death howls at me as I defy it and snaps its hideous jaws behind me. I have seen terrors that can only be imaged. Terrors that, just to witness them, risk us losing our minds."

The Emperor studied her for a while. He noted her tattered cloak. Her worn and faded clothes. Her old, split boots. Her battered walking cane. Her dilapidated satchel and her often-mended water bag. These were not the possessions of a wealthy person, but her accent had none of the roughness of the peasant and lacked the twang of a small-scale landowner. Her skin was a very dark brown, burned and abused by the searing heat and the relentless glare of the sun in the desert.

"Who are you?" demanded the Emperor.

"I am Beatrice, your excellency" she replied, honouring him, now, with a slight bow. "I come from beyond where the laws of the Empire extend their protection. The place your people call 'The Far West' where life is a daily battle for survival. The area that leads out into the 'Hollow Lands'."

"Why are you here?", asked the Emperor.

"There are visitors in the Furthest West.", she said; "Strangers that have never been encountered before. They have weapons of terrible power. They have a language that sounds bizarre and unusual."

"You have seen these people? With your own eyes?"

"Yes. I have.", she replied.

"How did you communicate with them?"

"They speak our tongue.", she told him, "They speak it well. They talk it as if they were born to it."

Callibus looked uneasy. "Who are they? These visitors?", He enquired.

The old woman opened her mouth to speak, but Dreadmont quickly raised a hand to silence her.

"She talks nonsense!" Dreadmont interrupted, "She speaks of things that are impossible. She has lost her senses in the sun!"

"The strangers," she said, "Come from a long, long way to the South. Way beyond where the sea appears to end."

Dreadmont exploded with rage, visibly shaking.

"Don't listen to this foolish woman!", shouted Dreadmont.

As the woman turned to him, Dreadmont lifted his arm to threaten her with a blow. In a split second, the old woman placed her stick under his arm and took hold of it, placing her arm over the top of his, trapping him.

The guard quickly drew his sword and placed its point an inch from the woman's neck, just below her chin. She turned to the guard and lifted her chin in the air, looking him straight in the eyes. The guard stiffened, his mouth dropped open and he hurriedly lowered his sword.

Kenitra could not see her eyes, but she could clearly see those of the guard. The look of horror in them and his hurry to first bend his knee, then leap to attention, told her everything. He had drawn his sword on a worthless hag, but then recognised, from her deportment, that she was of high birth.

Dreadmont looked aghast and had frozen to the spot. The woman, very deliberately, released his arm.

Dreadmont made a brief growling noise from his throat and, as the woman turned back to the Emperor, he reached to his side and drew out his knife.

The old woman whirled, with astonishing speed, and brought her stick down on Dreadmont's hand. Dreadmont, taken completely by surprise, cried out in pain and the knife clattered to the ground.

Kenitra decided that she liked this woman.

The guard remained studiously stood to attention, carefully aloof from the action. Callibus looked the guard in the eye, then pointed at the knife on the ground and shook his head. The guard put a foot on the knife to prevent it from being retrieved and almost managed to hide a trace of a smile, as he did so.

Callibus nodded to the guard, then to Dreadmont, then pointed to the door. To Dreadmont's simmering fury, the guard promptly escorted him out, minus his knife.

As Dreadmont's back disappeared from the room, Callibus gestured to the woman to resume.

"The visitors", she continued, "Have sailed vast distances, across wide and empty oceans, in mighty ships to reach our shores. "

"Big ships? They bring an army?", the Emperor asked, alarmed.

"No, Your Excellence. Their numbers are few."

"What do they want?", he asked, clearly puzzled, "Do you know?"

"They come for the Nightmare Beasts, Your Excellence."

The Emperor did not even try to disguise his bafflement: "They want the huge, vile, evil creatures from the valleys beyond the ape men and the blasphemers?"

"Yes, your Excellence"

"Why do they want them? Why would *anybody* want them?", he demanded.

"To make war on their enemies."

The Emperor, Callibus and Kenitra gasped in unison.