

# Chapter 2

Zarr and Yant had grown accustomed to living in their sister's shadow. When they had been prevented from entering their father's counsel chambers, as their entourage was abruptly curtailed, it was just another blow they had to absorb.

They had all been devastated by their mother's death. Both brothers had been numbed and shocked, walking around like shadows of themselves for almost a week. Kenitra, however, had been afforded an extra level of mourning, or so it seemed to them. As both the youngest and as the daughter, Kenitra was officially recognised as mourning. As if it were a job or a position at court.

Zarr and Yant had both been in tears, intermittently, as the full horror of their mother's demise gradually sank in. They had not even attempted to hide their weeping from each other. Always the closest of friends as children, and only a year apart in ages, they were like two halves of the same self.

Kenitra had never been excluded or shut out of anything they did as children. She was always invited into their games and their pastimes and never resented their mother's insistence at inclusion when they unintentionally overlooked her.

They were happy, even proud, to admit that their sister was as good as either of them at anything they did. She was also never outdone by any of their friends. She was their equal at climbing trees or rocks, at running, swimming, hunting and riding. On their camping expeditions, she was never daunted by anything and never had to be given special dispensation. She was, in all respects, an "honorary boy".

Kenitra was no less accomplished in the fighting arts and was a worthy opponent in any kind of sparring. She could fire a bow, throw an axe, wield a slingshot and use a spear or a pole with the best of them. When it came to sword fighting she was gifted. Zarr still had a cut on his jaw from having underestimated her in a mock duel.

Zarr, the eldest, still smiled a little and still shivered a little when he recalled how he'd received the scar on his jaw. He had lost his temper during a practice sword fight, one on one. They had scuffled and his thumb had been struck, painfully, by the edge of the handguard of her sword. He had become enraged and had, unwisely, decided to use his superior weight and size to drive home a savage attack on her.

Even now, many years later, he could still recall everything, as clearly as if it were yesterday. He had thrust and slashed at her, so forcefully that the trainer had shouted to him to calm down. He knew that his fury was dangerous and that he had wanted to punish her. He was ashamed to admit that he had wanted to hurt her.

He remembered how, suddenly, she seemed to retreat into some quiet composure, a zone of perfect calm. There had been not even a trace or flicker of fear in her eyes. She had looked at him in a way that still managed to disturb him to recollect.

Zarr was good with a sword. His arm and the blade were almost a part of him. He moved instinctively, with grace and great agility. Up to this point, though aware and respectful of his sister's excellent skill, he had regarded himself significantly better. Without warning and completely unexpectedly he had been outclassed. Her footwork was flawless. It was almost as if she could predict his every move. Wherever he put his weapon, she met him, clashing and parrying with deftness and eerie precision.

At this point, the trainer had called to him for a second time, louder and more insistently, and had picked up a shield and started to make his way across to them to intervene.

Seeing a fleeting opportunity, a weakness in her technique, he had lunged at her. His move had been violent, even savage. Then, at the very last second, he realised, to his horror that she had made a feint. She had deliberately misled him. He was astonished and desperately offended.

His counter move had come alarmingly close to his sister's eye. In reply, she had struck his blade at a daringly shallow angle to deflect him. The sheer courage of the move and the elegance of its execution was something he was unable to acknowledge for a long, long time afterwards.

It took Zarr a momentous struggle with his inner demons, over several years, before he could admit that he had left her absolutely no option to defend herself and that the carry through of her move had been unavoidable. Any less power and she would have left herself open. It had been his fault. Worst of all, was the agonising confession to himself that - had their positions been reversed - he would almost certainly have purposely cut her deeper than she had cut him.

Zarr stood at the window, completely distracted, looking dreamily out across the balcony at the fields, watching a couple of horsemen rounding up cattle.

Yant watched as his brother's expression became more and more contemplative and less and less focused on the view outside.

Yant was just a year younger than his brother, but that one year less of being alive had condemned him to be second, rather than first, in line to one day be Emperor.

Yant and Zarr was very similar in appearance and people who met them infrequently would often mistake one for the other. They both had the same dark (almost black) hair, the same blue/grey eyes, the same kind of handsome face and the same lean, muscular, athletic physique.

All three of the Emperor's children were six foot tall. Their mother had been two inches shorter than they and their father was two inches taller. In Oydraen society, where almost everyone was either their mother's height or two inches less, the brothers' tallness gave them what was widely known as a 'royal' stature.

Yant looked at his older brother, indulgently. "Are you dreaming?" he asked.

Zarr turned his head quickly, "I was thinking about how Kenitra has changed", he replied.

Yant looked at him, thoughtfully, for a few moments, then said: "You mean the way she behaves in general or the way she treats the two of us?"

"Both," Zarr replied, "It makes me wish we could all be children, again".

With a hint of mockery, Yant declared: "She is **Queen** Kenitra, now!"

"Yes," Zarr agreed, "But not forever. One day I will be Emperor and I will be in charge."

Yant laughed. "Then we will all have cause to fear!", he said with a sparkle in his eyes.

"My first decree," Zarr announced, "Will be that you be required to wear a horse's head. So you can look exactly like the idiot we all know you to be!"

Yant smiled, but it was short lived. His face became serious again as he said: "We lost our mother two years ago. Let's not go looking ahead to a day without our father, too."

Zarr frowned. "If Kenitra could go back in time and have mother alive again and give up being Queen, she wouldn't hesitate."

"I know," replied Zarr, looking miserable "She **is** Queen, though, and that is that. She is almost a stranger to us, now. Our family doesn't quite feel the same, anymore, having to bow to both our father **and** to our little sister."

Zarr appeared to contemplate. "She didn't want to be Queen, but I think she is getting used to it and I suspect that she has developed a liking for power."

Yant looked serious. "Most of the time, father doesn't tend to think it necessary for us to be involved in discussing matters of state, any more."

"What do you think he is discussing right now, without us?", Zarr asked.

"He has a Queen to discuss matters of state.", Yant quipped, "We are merely required to hunt, fish, ride horses and look seriously handsome."

They both exploded into gales of laughter and were only just recovering when, suddenly, there was a knocking at the door. The knocking consisted of two blows together, a pause, a single blow, a pause, then two more blows together.

The two brothers looked at each other in alarm.

"A Royal summons", Yant declared, "I think we are about to find out. We had best not keep them waiting."

They had both taken just a single pace towards the door, intending to walk briskly to the Emperor's Counsel Chambers, when it swung open. Two servants hurried in, bowing and cutting the air with their hands. Two soldiers from the Emperor's Guard followed close behind. Then, to their surprise, in strode the Emperor and his Queen Consort.

The two brothers bowed low, briefly sliced the air with upturned palms, and exchanged worried glances which said: 'This cannot be good if they have come to us'.

The Emperor held up his hands to silence the already completely soundless room.

"I need you both to come, urgently, to a meeting." Said the Emperor.

"By 'come' and by 'urgently'," clarified Queen Kenitra, "We mean that you are to follow us there, right now."

The two brothers exchanged a glance. Without a syllable being spoken, they shared pointed acknowledgement of their sister's use of the words 'We' and 'Us' in the context used by Monarchs about their joint selves.

"My Emperor." said Zarr, closely echoed by Yant, to their father.

"My Queen." said Zarr, closely echoed by Yant, to their sister.

"To hear your wish," said Zarr, "Is to obey it, willingly, as a command."

Yant nodded his agreement.

The Emperor looked at his two sons, then at his daughter, then said, in a confiding voice: "We must act to change the destiny of our nation."

With this, The Emperor, turned to the door and, pausing for the briefest moment for his Queen to fall in beside him, set off at a slow and deliberate pace.

Zarr looked up, as if he were able to see straight through the ceiling. His features reflected a mixture of concentration and expectation. His brother glanced across at him with brows furrowed in puzzlement. They had taken no more than six paces before Zarr heard the sound he had predicted: The tolling of a bell in the tower above them. Its slow, dull, ominous notes calling the Emperor's Counsel to meet.

It would not do for the Emperor's Counsel to keep them waiting, but – at the same time – its members were unable to transport themselves through the physical walls of the palace, no matter how eager and willing. The Emperor, therefore, abiding by long tradition, feigned complete indifference and a total lack of urgency. Pausing, intermittently, along their route for either the Emperor or the Queen to examine a tapestry here, a painting there, a statue or a piece of display armour elsewhere, the group progressed at pace not out of keeping at a funeral.

Against a background of hurried shuffling, and even running footsteps, clearly discernible from several directions, the group finally arrived at the ceremonial doors to the Emperor's Counsel Chamber. This was a different entrance to the one that they had used only a short time earlier and permitted easier access to the long, imposing table that dominated the near end.

After pausing for a few moments, the Emperor nodded to the guards and the huge metal studded doors, with their finely detailed gold decorations, were swung open.

The table that stood before them was a masterpiece of grandeur. It boasted ornate, spiralled, copper encased legs; a massive marble slab surface and gleaming gold edging rich with elaborate ornamentation. The table was the triumphant manifestation of hundreds of years of war and conquest.

Its copper legs shone with the gleam of what had once been the helmets of one of Oydrae's enemies, crushed long ago and extinguished from history. The gold around its edge was taken from the crowns of monarchs foolish enough to defy Oydrae and attract its displeasure. The marble top was said to be from the temple in Xyliana, a legendary land known in fables from two thousand years back.

The origin of the table's marble top was widely held to be a myth invented by The Ancients who had founded Oydrae. Those who doubted its authenticity, however, only dared voice their opinions behind their hands and in hushed voices.

At either side of the table were tall chairs, each with a high, ornate back decorated with intricate carvings of animals, birds, flowers & trees. The twelve chairs each had the name of a famous knight from Oydraen history carved into a wooden scroll at the top of the back. Children in Oydrae learned the name of these knights

from an early age and were required to be able to recite them, by heart, before they were permitted to handle a weapon and learn to fight.

The knights celebrated by the chairs were 'The Dakkrum', a holy order of warriors who had given their lives defending the Glass Tower during the fall of Dakk, the capital of ancient Oydrae. The Gods, it was said, had been so furious at their slaying that they had turned the leaders of the assaulting force to stone. Stood in a circle in the desert – where Dakk was reputed to have once stood – the weathered forms of those unfortunates still stand, today, their features now worn smooth by the effect of countless sandstorms.

Callibus and the ten Counsellors all got to their feet as the Emperor and the Queen processed up the room to the head of the table and sat down in the only two seats decorated with gold. Callibus stood before the seat next to the Emperor. Zarr and Yant stood before the seats at the opposite end of the table.

Around the table, Callibus, Zarr, Yant and the Counsellors first lowered their heads in respect and then leaned forward into a bow. The Emperor raised his hand, then lowered it, with palm downwards, gesturing for them to sit.

Everybody sat. The two seats, either side of the table, closest to the royal pair, remained empty.

The Emperor sat in silence. The Queen sat in silence. Nobody at the table either spoke or moved.

The guards slowly closed the tall, heavy doors but remained, frozen in place, holding the handles, clearly waiting for something. After a few moments, there was a barely audible tap from outside the doors and the guards gently hauled them open, again.

In came an old man and an old woman, both with long white hair. The man had, in addition, a long white beard. They both walked with the aid of a tall staff, each topped with a silver goat skull. Accompanying them were two young, ceaselessly attentive, female servants who pattered around the elderly pair. Several times the girls reached out to almost take an arm, as one or the other old folk faltered, but quickly pulling back as the support they offered proved unnecessary.

As the two newcomers reached their seats, either side of the far end of the table, all but the Emperor and Queen stood up. The Emperor raised two longest fingers to his forehead to show them his respect. The Queen repeated the gesture.

The two elders both placed one hand on top of the other, palms down, and briefly lowered their heads.

The two girls, with clearly genuine affection and concern, gently helped the two Wise Elders to sit.

Zarr and Yant, meanwhile, were unsuccessfully trying to disguise their obvious fascination and appreciation of the old pair's pretty assistants. This earned the brothers a disapproving scowl from one the old man, which – as it faded – transformed itself, briefly, into a rueful smile. The Queen allowed herself a duplicate smile to flicker on her lips.

The Emperor drew in a long breath and exhaled it as an even longer sigh. He looked down and placed his hands on the marble surface of the table, rubbing it in little circular motions and smiled a small, thin lipped, melancholy smile.

He looked up, glanced at his daughter, then at his two sons, in turn, at the opposite end of the table.

"As we all know," the Emperor began, "Oydrae was established a thousand years ago, by the first Emperor: Edward the Wise. He drew together ninety-four localities. The line he drew around these places defined the empire. It created the borders that we have today."

Everybody around the table nodded their agreement, some slowly and some more eagerly. One scratched his chin, thoughtfully. Another squeezed his bottom lip between index finger and thumb, pondering the words he was hearing.

"Before the Empire was created by Edward the Wise," the Emperor continued, "The world that existed was in a constant state war. We were under attack from other regions and could not rely on our neighbours. The empire united ninety-four little places, under a single banner, against all who would come against us. To attack any part of the empire was to attack all of it and we rose, as one, to defeat invaders. Oydrae was never again defeated by an enemy that came against us."

Some glanced around, cautiously studying each other's faces. Some exchanged searching glances.

"The Empire did not bring peace." The Emperor continued, "The thousand years of the Empire has seen a thousand years of conflicts, armed struggles, uprisings and rebellions. These bloody battles are fought between ourselves."

Some of the people around the table shuffled uncomfortably.

The Emperor looked to the Wise Elder to his left, then across to the Wise Elder on his right. Neither the man nor the woman changed their expression to challenge his wisdom.

"The Empire swept away poverty, plague and starvation." He continued, "Other nations learned that attacking Oydrae was to guarantee their own defeat. They

could not cross our borders and hope to win. Unfortunately, while we are united against our enemies but divide amongst ourselves.”

There was an embarrassed silence with no comment or response.

“One district fights another district.” The Emperor declared, “One city fights another city. One group of cities fights another group of cities. Districts make treaties with neighbouring districts to war with other districts. War Lords and Tribes battle with other War Lords and Tribes. This goes on from the Iron Lands in the West, to Shoornt in the North. It goes on from the Shimmering Hills and Vaarl in the East to Golden Sheer and Kalferna in the South.”

The Emperor looked at the Queen. She made the sign of respect.

The Emperor looked at Zarr, who made the same gesture, then at Yant, who repeated it.

“Our lack of unity is our weakness. It holds us back and makes us vulnerable.” The Emperor told them, “It makes us vulnerable to enemies we have not yet even met and who – in just a few years – could sweep our Empire away and enslave us all.”

The Wise Elders, the Counsellors and the Emperor’s sons gasped in unison.