

Chapter 3

The talk in the Counsel Chamber was whispered and anxious. The Counsellors, sat around the massive marble table, comparing points of view and exchanging opinions, in hushed tones, after recovering from their shock and amazement.

Without looking round, the Emperor gestured to the guard stood behind him, pointing to the doors where the other two guards stood, securing entry to the Counsel Chamber.

The guard, in turn, signalled to another, who left the room for a moment and then returned with the old woman, Beatrice.

The Emperor raised his hand and the room promptly felt silent.

"This morning," began the Emperor, "It was necessary to end the life of a priest who had been arrested for treason by Laar Dreadmont and his people."

Queen Kenitra flinched, inwardly, at the use of the word "Laar", meaning "esteemed" in the old tongue. In her opinion, Dreadmont was a long way from ever deserving the title "Laar".

"I have learned that the priest was promised a last-minute pardon in return for his co-operation." The Emperor's face took on a troubled look, "I had no idea."

The Wise Elder closest to Callibus looked to the Emperor and placed his index finger on the middle of his bottom lip. The Emperor granted his request to speak by rolling both his lips a little way into his mouth and clenching them with his teeth.

"What kind of treason, your Excellency?", asked the old man.

"Plotting with the rebels who attacked the palace last month."

"The rebels were taken by surprise"

"Yes." replied the Emperor.

"They were taken by surprise in the temple."

"Yes." replied the Emperor.

"The priest would have known about..." the old man hesitated, "About the...."

Callibus cleared his throat theatrically. The old man closed his mouth.

"The priest," said Callibus, "Could have ensured that the rebels were not discovered."

"Indeed," the Wise Elder confirmed, "That was precisely my meaning."

Callibus gave the Elder an amiable smile.

The female Wise Elder spoke: "If the priest were assisting the rebels, he appears to have made sure that they were caught."

The Emperor, Callibus and the two Wise Elders exchanged meaningful glances, but, by common consent, left the words they were all thinking unspoken.

Unbidden, those words flashed through Kenitra's head: "Then why did Dreadmont want him dead?".

As children, Kenitra, Zarr and Yant had played in the secret tunnels that ran through the walls, ceilings and floors of the temple, learning how to escape and hide if the palace, next door to it, were ever taken by siege. Their parents had drilled into them that this was vital to know because – at all costs - they were to avoid being captured and held for ransom.

Pronouncing the word 'Laar' as if it were poisonous, the male Wise Elder asked: "Where is... Laar... Dreadmont?".

Before she even realised that she had spoken, Kenitra said: "His name is Carl Dreadmont, Wise One."

The merest hint of a smile danced for a second on the Emperor's lips.

The Wise Elder bowed graciously to the Queen and said: "Your Highness."

The Queen bowed back, an extremely rare and hugely significant gesture for a Queen Consort, which caused Callibus to stiffen. "Laar Heek." She replied, using the old tongue for "Esteemed and revered".

Callibus sat bolt upright as if he had been pricked by a pin.

The Wise Elders looked at the other for a long moment. Then both Wise Elders looked at the Emperor for a long moment. The Emperor's expression remained completely impassive. The Emperor looked over at his daughter. To anybody else, his eyes were expressionless, but to Kenitra they shone with immense pride. Immense pride in *her*.

Zarr and Yant, from their distant end of the table looked wistfully at their father. Without a word being spoken each knew that the other was thinking. They would give anything for their father to ever look at them like he was looking at their sister.

At that precise moment, a long mournful note from a horn began to sound. It was like the cry of a lonely wolf. It seemed to hang in the air for a long time.

The Emperor waited for the note to fade and then said: "Dreadmont is no more."

Kenitra watched the Counsellors exchange nervous glances. Those who had been closest to Dreadmont looked the most uneasy. Rebel attacks in the Capital City were not commonplace, but few felt entirely relaxed. Treachery by one within the Palace, as highly placed as Dreadmont, was shocking and disturbing.

Dreadmont had been responsible for safeguarding the peace of the Palace, in particular, and of the Capital City in general. His ruthlessness had made him feared, but he had failed to keep good relations with several important people and this had proved fatally unwise.

Kenitra mused that, had Dreadmont been in the habit of killing less people, he would have made more friends and fewer enemies. He had, however, enjoyed being feared and killing had become almost a hobby.

"We live in dangerous times," said Callibus, solemnly.

"...And," replied the Emperor, "The danger isn't getting any less."

Callibus followed the direction of the Emperor's eyes and found them resting on the woman, Beatrice, who had remained silent throughout. The Emperor met Callibus' gaze and gave him a very discrete nod.

"Gentlemen of the Counsel. Ladies of the Counsel," Callibus began, "Before us is a woman who has travelled here from the West...."

He scanned the faces of those gathered, noting that while most looked only slightly disapproving, a couple were unable to hide a sneer.

".....As far West as you can go." He added.

Callibus noted, with satisfaction, the sudden jolt of electricity that instantly travelled around the room and the look of surprise on their faces.

"Dreadmont," Callibus told them, "During his last hour of existence, shared information – after skilled persuasion - that he had previously withheld."

Everybody looked intently at Callibus.

"We, in Oydrae, know of the lands that lay at our borders. These lands pay us taxes. They raise troops for us. We protect them from invaders. They deliver us tribute every five years. To the West, however, things are different. The further we

go, the more the lands become inhospitable. Eventually, things are so hazardous that our presence and our influence peters out.”

“This lady,” said Callibus, pointing to Beatrice, “Comes from the West and knows what lays beyond the ape men, beyond the wizards and witches and beyond those horrible, nightmare creatures.”

Callibus touched two fingers to his forehead and the rest of those present did the same, some looking slightly puzzled. When the Emperor made the same gesture, any puzzlement was replaced by astonishment.

“This lady is Beatrice,” Callibus announced, “And she is fluent in the High Speech of the Ancients. The Emperor receives her as one of noble birth. Her news is of such importance that you have been urgently called to hear it personally.”

Beatrice bowed and cut the air to the Emperor, to the Queen, to Callibus, then to both Wise Elders in the traditional sign of deference & submission, then looked directly at Zarr and Yant, at the other end of the table, and touched her forehead with two fingers to show respect.

Zarr and Yant surprised glances. They were not High People in the Capital City. They were brothers of the Queen Consort. Yet, this visitor, had singled them out with a meaningful gesture.

Beatrice reached behind her head and tugged at something. Both Emperor’s Guards, who were stood nearby, put their hands - lightning quick - to the grip of their swords and bared the first couple of inches, ready to draw them fully at any hint of need. Beatrice appeared to hear the sound but did not flinch. She continued to pull at the thing behind her neck and, as she did so, a thin rope began to surface from under her top.

Kenitra glanced at Callibus, as he gazed, entranced, at the scene that was unfolding. Subconsciously, Callibus’ own hand went to the nape of his neck where, less than an hour ago, he had worn the blue rope of a messenger. Suddenly, Callibus’ eyes widened, like saucers. At that precise moment, from the corner of her eye, she saw the two Emperor’s Guards drop to one knee. Kenitra looked quickly back to the old woman and her jaw fell open.

Zarr and Yant leapt to their feet simultaneously, both slowly and deliberately cutting the air, horizontally, with the palm of an upturned hand.

The Queen Consort looked at her father and her heart melted as she caught the almost undiscernible look of pride in his eyes as he regarded her two brothers.

Her tall brothers grew taller.

The rope around the old woman's neck had risen steadily up until it was around her throat. She wore not the blue rope of a messenger, but the ceremonial purple rope of a Senior Envoy sent by a king or a queen!