

Chapter 4

"Noble people of Oydrae's Capital City," Beatrice began, "Wise elders, great Emperor, honoured queen. I bring you word from beyond the Western Border of the empire. I bring you word from the Far West and from the Hollow Lands."

All eyes were on Beatrice. Nobody in the room spoke.

"A thousand years ago, the first Emperor – Edward the Wise – rebuilt the old city of Dakk from the ruins in which it had laid derelict for many years. He renamed it 'The Capital City'."

Beatrice slowly scanned the room for dissent. She found none.

"Edward, along with the original Founders, established the empire by drawing a border around their area of influence. It contained over ninety different smaller zones. This huge area, together, became the empire of Oydrae."

Kenitra glanced across to the doors of the chamber and noticed several additions to the Emperor's Guards stealthily slipping in.

"The effect of creating the empire was to consolidate a huge area of land that shared similar interests and cultures.", she continued.

A few heads nodded, thoughtfully, in agreement.

"One significant result of creating the empire was to end wars on it by neighbouring regions. Oydrae swept down on its old enemies and subdued them, demanding taxes and tribute. Oydrae became far too powerful to attack and its borders were respected".

There were more nods from the audience.

"Oydrae contains six regions: The Iron Lands to the West, Shoornt to the North, The Shimmering Hills and Vaarl to the East and The Golden Sheer and Kalferna to the South."

A few faces now began to look vaguely puzzled and, silently, a few searching glances were exchanged. Why was somebody from beyond Oydrae, an 'Outlander', be giving them a history lesson?

Kenitra felt a change in the atmosphere in the chamber and glanced around. The posture of a couple of Counsellors had changed, slightly, but everybody appeared to still be quite relaxed. Allowing her eyes to take in the full chamber, she noticed that the number of Emperor's Guards stood at the two side doors at the top of the chamber had mysteriously increased from two to six.

"After a hundred years or so of the empire," Beatrice continued, "Some of the regions became restless and there were some battles fought between major cities and between a few areas. The Capital City sent troops to put down this unrest and restore order."

A few voices were heard muttering, here and there, around the table. The Emperor, Queen and Wise Elders remained impassive.

"Within a hundred years of the first battle between regions of Oydrae, there came the first attack on the Capital City. The traitors were crushed."

A couple of people grumbled and a few hostile words were voiced, deliberately loud enough to carry their sentiment if not their detail.

Beatrice noted the growing discomfort of her audience, but continued, not altering her tone: "The Capital City deployed forces to deliver reprisals for the attack and burned several towns to the ground."

The Queen found her eyes drawn to the curtain along the side of the Chamber and noted that – at the point where it met the floor – a long line of boots had appeared, belonging to at least a dozen newly arrived soldiers.

Queen Kenitra stiffened slightly and the Wise Elder to her left looked at her, directly into her eyes, with a calm and reassuring expression. The two women held each other's glance for a long moment.

In a leisurely gesture, the Emperor extended his arm towards the ceiling and opened his palm. The whole room fell to complete silence in a heartbeat. All eyes turned back to Beatrice. Some of the expressions bore a glimmer of hostility.

"The Empire has been strong against its enemies." Beatrice continued, "Calls to arms to defend it, have been obeyed swiftly and without exception. All parts of Oydrae know that they are stronger and safer, together, against common enemies."

Beatrice looked around the room, slowly and methodically, looking into each face in turn. The tension in the room was now palpable.

"Sadly," Beatrice declared, defiantly, "Not all of Oydrae's enemies are outside of its borders."

One of the two Counsellors from Kalferna brought a clenched fist down on the table with a muffled sound. Several heads turned in that direction. Back in history, the first disturbances and uprisings that had occurred in the new Empire of Oydrae had started in Kalferna.

Callibus, looking completely unperturbed, rubbed his right palm on the marble table in a small circle, making a gentle polishing motion, and glanced at Kenitra. Kenitra felt oddly calmed.

The Emperor looked at Callibus and clenched his jaw. Callibus, in response, gripped the edge of the table in both hands, waited a few moments and then suddenly stood up.

"You are Counsellors to the Emperor!" Callibus shouted, his voice ringing around the Counsel Chamber, "Loyal to the Emperor!"

"Truth!" they replied, very loudly and very clearly, without looking one to the other.

Kenitra looked at her elder brother, Zarr. Both he and Yant were sat with both fists resting flat on the table. Zarr's expression was impassive but, after briefly glancing to a group of nearby soldiers, they glinted a question. Having no answer for him, she allowed nothing to show in her own eyes.

"You are loyal to the Queen!" Callibus bellowed.

"Truth!" they replied, very loudly and very clearly, without looking one to the other.

"You are loyal to his sons!" Callibus bellowed.

"Truth!" they replied, as one voice, equally loudly and equally emphatically.

Several of the Counsellors were unable to suppress puzzlement as they absorbed Callibus' words. Words spoken as a statement, but tinged with a hint of accusation. Muttering and murmuring sprang up around the table but, this time, it did not promptly die away.

"You are loyal to the Empire!", Callibus boomed.

"Truth!" they replied ever so slightly less loudly and ever so slightly less clearly. The faltering half second of hesitation, that flickered around the table, had hung in the air for an age.

Various Counsellors were looking one to the other to exchange visual reassurances and some grumbled under their breath.

Callibus struck the marble table with the palm of his hand. In an instant, all twenty-five members of the Emperor's Guard drew their swords, cut a horizontal slice through the air in front of them and then stamped first their left foot and then their right foot on the ground.

The metallic ringing of their swords reverberated around the room like a bell being struck and the sound of their stamping feet echoed like thunder.

"These men share your enthusiasm!", Callibus declared with a sweep of his arm to indicate the soldiers, "The safety of everybody in this chamber is of concern to them. That we cannot take anybody's safety for granted, in the Capital City, is a sign of these dangerous times."

Kenitra looked up at the walls of the chamber, noting the tiny slots and slits cut into the stone at strategic points and remembering looking out through them as a child. She shivered. 'Now,' she thought, 'We must fear the very walls.'

Callibus nodded to Beatrice and she resumed speaking.

"Oydrae has visitors who have arrived, by sea, in the Furthest West on a mission from their homeland, far beyond the horizon. They have powerful weapons but bring no army. They have no wish to war with Oydrae but they warn of an enemy in their own world who encroaches, year by year, towards us."

The Counsellor, Richard, from the Iron Lands put a hand on the top of his own head. The Emperor nodded, giving him permission to stand and touched his own lips, then pointed to the Counsellor, giving him permission to speak.

"Senior and most honoured Envoy," he said, addressing Beatrice directly, "You wear the symbol of high rank, but I cannot think of any country that you might represent. Who is it who sends you to bring us a warning?"

In answer, Beatrice reached down and turned over the leather belt she wore. She pulled out a small blade and ran it down the edge of the belt, peeling it open.

"His Excellency the Emperor has accepted, as genuine, that I have come on a high mission," she told Callibus, "But I have been given credentials to furnish if I were to be pressed to do so."

Carefully, Beatrice extracted a long, narrow piece of paper from its hiding place in her belt and held it out for inspection.

"I present my credentials to the Emperor." Beatrice said.

Callibus motioned to Kenitra, who accepted the long, thin blade of paper on her father's behalf. With the help of Callibus, she began to warm the heavily waxed yellow paper, with very great care, by wrapping it around a knife and heating the opposite end of it in a candle flame.

The lady Wise Elder leaned towards them and whispered: "I have not seen the like of this in almost a life time. We received a letter from a temple, once, that had been passed down by monks, over hundreds of years, waiting for the time to be right to present it. Its likeness to this is uncanny!"

As tension mounted around the table and as speculation ran rife among the assembled Counsellors, Callibus and Queen Kenitra worked steadily on the document. With painstaking delicacy, the paper was unfolded and laid between two glass plates, allowing it to be illuminated from the back.

The two Wise Elders were amazed and astounded to realise that the whole of the document was written in the diligent and exacting classic hand of the Ancients. After perusing and scrutinising the script for some time, it was decided to translate it into the modern tongue by producing a copy document.

A long time had elapsed before the chore was completed. Much discussion between the Wise Elders had been required in order to agree the precise and exact words. At their conclusion, neither the Emperor, nor the Queen, nor Callibus could fail to appreciate the sheer ecstasy, delight and jubilation of the Wise Elders at the content of the paper.

Callibus called for order at the table and all those gathered fell into reverential silence. The Emperor began to read the copy document and immediately stopped. He looked to his daughter, awestruck, and leaned towards her, holding out the document and pointing out the words for her to read. Kenitra exclaimed aloud and covered her mouth with her hand. The Emperor beckoned Callibus to his side and showed him the same words to read. Callibus gave a little cry and his hands flew to his head, gripping it either side of his temple.

"Protect the Envoy!" the Emperor cried. He looked up to the top of the walls and added: "From all means of attack!"

Kenitra noticed the Captain of the Guard look up, too, and knew that the secret of the hidden passages and crawl-ways was not a secret to her.

A group of twelve Emperor's Guards ran to form a human wall around the Envoy. The Guards quickly passed around battle shields and the surprised Envoy physically disappeared beneath an armoured shelter.

Kenitra shuddered, imaging the metallic clicks and pings of deadly poisoned darts raining down. None came. Nobody was up there, she concluded. The nagging fear would still not leave her.

The Emperor, Queen Kenitra, Callibus and the two Wise Elders hurriedly retired to a corner of the chamber to continue their group scrutiny of the document.

The response of the Counsellors was consternation. Not even in their wildest imagination were they able to come close to the truth of what was unfolding. Their guesses and their reckonings, even at their most extreme, were simply not absurd enough to compare with reality!

The Emperor and his party returned to the table.

There was no need to signal for silence as the whole room was deathly quiet. Every face was turned to the Emperor. Every expression was one of tense expectation.

"The Envoy's credentials are in order." announced the Emperor. "She is sent from here." He paused while they absorbed this information. "She is sent from the Capital City of Oydrae."

Astonished looks and incredulous glances were exchanged around the table.

The Emperor held up the original letter and declared: "Her mission was authorised at the highest level and was signed, personally, one thousand years ago, by the hand of the First Emperor, Edward the Wise."

The chamber fell into stunned silence, for none of those present could quite believe their ears.