

# Chapter 5

The silence in the chamber was suddenly broken by the exchange of shocked and astonished comments between the Counsellors.

The Emperor gave the Counsellors a few moments to finish and, when the volume in the room had mostly reduced to murmurs, he raised his hand for silence, which was instantaneous.

Everybody waited for the Emperor to speak, but he merely stood up and remained quiet. After a long pause, he gestured to Beatrice. The Emperor's Guards had raised their shields above her and around her, giving her the appearance of sitting in a metal cabin with an open front.

"I assure you," said the Emperor, "That, even among cunning and skilful enemies, *our* enemies are particularly cunning and particularly skilful. There are things about the palace, the temple and the surrounding buildings that are known to very few people. We cannot be sure what our enemies know. They are many and varied and so may be their knowledge."

The room remained completely silent.

The Emperor nodded to Beatrice, who addressed the chamber: "I am an envoy sent by the Ancient Ones. I represent a mission that began in the distant past. A mission that began when the Dakkrum were slain by the invaders."

Around the table, each person, including the Emperor, Queen and Wise Elders touched the top of their head with two fingers and stroked them down to the middle of their brow between their eyes. Since as far back as anybody could remember, this had been the ultimate sign of respect for the gods and for their chosen representatives.

"The Emperor Edward - known as "Edward the Wise", the first of the Emperors - commanded that my ancestors form a secret order known as "The Watchers". Our sacred objective was to wait for the day when the prophecies of his priests would come true. This mission has been passed on, from mother to daughter and from father to son, for countless generations."

Everybody remained silent, watching her intently.

"The founder of our order led a group of my people into the mountains. They were sent there for refuge and for safety while the task was begun to rebuild Oydrae after its sacking by the invaders.

“They started out living in natural caves, but soon learned to dig and tunnel and they expanded them into a huge underground network.

“Fresh springs ran down through the rocks so they never went thirsty. Gas seeped up through the rock and they learned to channel and harness it by coating the floors, roofs and walls with clay to seal them, so that the gas only seeped out where they wanted it. This allowed them to burn it for light and heat.

“Their writings tell us that they farmed bees, for honey and that they ate wild plants and berries, goats, hares, birds and lizards. They were entirely self-sufficient and lived anonymously and discretely away from any traces of civilisation.

“They did, however, have Rangers whose job was to venture further and further out into the adjoining territories and to explore the wild and inhospitable lands, in all directions, including to the West.

“The teachings that they had inherited from the Holy Warriors were passed on from one generation to the next as – loyal to their instructions – they waited and they watched.

“They were told to be alert for signs that would signal important moments in the times ahead. Some of these signs may or may not have been observed. It depends on differing interpretations of events.

“The most crucial event for which we were entrusted to watch out is one that is accepted, respected and dear to all of the regions of Oydrae. That event is the coming of The Bringer of Light.

Everyone in the room stroked twin fingers from the top of their heads to their forehead.

“Nothing that I say will be unknown to your Wise Elders.” Beatrice confided, horizontally cutting the air with her hand in the direction of the man and woman, in flowing robes, sat at the nearest end of the table.”

The Emperor looked pleased. Beatrice would have been absolutely justified – by her rank and position – to merely touch her forehead with her fingers to indicate respect for the elders. Instead she had cut the air in a gesture that indicated deference and reverence. Kenitra felt a perceptible wave of good will towards the Envoy sweep around the room.

The Wise Elders both inclined their heads in a bow towards Beatrice.

Beatrice continued: “The whole of our civilisation awaits the Bringer of Light. The Bringer of Light, so legend tells us, will usher in a new age. An age of peace. An age of prosperity. An age of unity. An age of stability.”

Her audience hung on her every word.

"For thirty, forty or fifty generations we have kept watch. We have obeyed the laws that were given to us. We have protected ourselves while inflicting the least possible harm on others. We have waited. We have watched. We have kept a vigil that has lasted for a millennium.

"I am here because I was commanded to be here. I was sent from here, this very city, all those centuries ago. I was instructed to bring you word. I was instructed how to know *when* to come."

The chamber was silent.

"Your Wise Elders will tell you that there was a sign that was foretold by the Ancients. A sign that was foretold by the Dakkrum. The knights of the Holy Order who gave their lives for the truth"

Each and every person present made the sign of highest respect.

"I travelled West, with the Rangers, as I had done many times before. I went to survey that long, elongated triangle of fierce and ferocious desert that forms The Hollow Lands. These lands that are vast and wide at their Northern point and narrow at their Southern point, where they meet the sea. Our holy scriptures told us that the word of the enemy for which we have waited would be brought by strangers who came up from the sea."

The silence in the room was total. Kenitra could hear her heart beating in her chest.

"I met the strangers in the desert. They had come North from the sea. I spoke with their captains who had sailed them from way beyond the horizon and the horizon beyond that. I spoke with their generals who had brought their strange war machines, up through the murderous, scorching sands."

All of a sudden, Kenitra, her father and her brothers were simultaneously overcome with a sense of dark foreboding.

"They spoke with me willingly. They did not guard their words. They told me that they recognised me. They told me that they had known to expect me."

A few puzzled looks were exchanged around the table.

"They expected me not because of any message sent back to them by scouts or information learned from travellers, explorers or merchants. They expected me because a thousand years of prophecies in their own culture had prepared them. They knew how to recognise me."

The puzzled looks now turned to ones of bafflement.

"They told me that they knew me by my eyes. Until they met me they had never encountered anybody, in all their wide and far flung travels, who had green eyes. To them I was unique."

Looks of apprehension were exchanged around the massive marble table and a few of the counsellors shifted nervously.

"They told me of their enemy. They told me of their evil, villainous, abominable foe.", said Beatrice, scanning the faces around the table.

"These strangers who live far to the South told me of their heinous, atrocious adversaries who creep Northwards, year by year, conquering up through the lands that lay far across the ocean to our East."

Kenitra's stomach knotted. It was as if she already knew what Beatrice was about to say. It was as if she had already lived this moment before.

Kenitra look Beatrice directly in her eyes. Beatrice looked back with a measured, steady gaze. Slowly, almost as if in a dream, Kenitra raised her hand up to her hair and grasped a lock of it between finger and thumb. Beatrice looked pained and made the merest inflection of a nod.

"Just as the strangers recognised me by a colour - the colour of my eyes - I recognised our enemy from our past by a colour, too."

Beatrice paused and inserted two fingers into the rope around her neck. Turning to face the Emperor, pulling her fingers forward to draw the rope taut around her neck, she appeared to offer grasp of it to him.

"I recognised our enemy of old by their red hair."

Groans of disbelief and gasps of incredulity erupted, involuntarily, around the table.

Beatrice loudly declared the news that nobody wanted to hear: "The invaders from a thousand years ago are on their way back!"