

Chapter 9

In the Capital City of Oydrae, the mood in the Emperor's counsel chamber pulsed with a complex mixture of doom, shock, anxiety and disbelief.

The Emperor stood up. Immediately everybody around the table sprang to their feet. As the two wise elders began to muster their strength to stand, the Emperor waved them to remain seated.

"A thousand years ago," began Emperor Kondrat, "When we were a scattered assortment of individual localities, a fearsome wave of warriors – the likes of which we had never before seen - swept across Oydrae and sacked it completely, laying waste to everything they found."

Everybody stood stock still. None of them needed a history lesson, but hearing the fate of Oydrae recounted in such stark and unambiguous terms was still unnerving.

The Emperor waved Kenitra, Callibus, Beatrice and the Wise Elders to sit.

The Emperor looked around the table and then carried on speaking: "We were ill prepared for this devastation. The weapons they wielded were beyond anything we had. The soldiers, of what is now the Capital Province, were swept aside. Those armies that were raised, in response, from the other provinces were similarly defeated in short order. We were completely overwhelmed."

The Emperor signalled for everybody else to take their seats, again.

"Our greatest weakness was our disunity. We were unable to resist their superior numbers, their superior weapons and the impact of their rigid discipline. I can only believe that they will now be better equipped than they were back then, that they will be every bit as disciplined and that they will be no less ruthless."

The Counsellors shifted uneasily. Kenitra suddenly became aware that around five or so additional Emperor's Guards had appeared in the chamber.

"We now have a strong, well trained, well disciplined, well motivated and tremendously powerful army. They are more than a match for any force across our known world."

There were eager nods of agreement around the table.

"Apart from the reckless and scandalous activities of the Rebels..." continued the Emperor, "The six regions of Oydrae are broadly at peace with each other. There are some skirmishes between localities and between some of the tribes..."

There were mutterings and grumbles between the Counsellors, decrying this or other faction and condemning the Rebels with common hatred and contempt.

"...But, the empire is neither as strong as it could be nor as it will need to be in order to have any hope of withstanding the onslaught of the Red Menace, when they return."

Beatrice, who had taken a seat next to Callibus, still closely and attentively flanked by the Emperor's Guard, placed her index finger on her bottom lip. The Emperor gestured for her to speak.

"From what the Visitors tell me," Beatrice declared, "The Red Menace are at least five years away from our shores and, if we are lucky, up to ten years away at best. They are gradually fighting their way up through an entire continent, far across the Ocean, but – at its most Northern point – they would only be a week's voyage away."

Beatrice bowed to the Emperor to indicate that she had finished.

Something caught Kenitra's attention. It was a movement she had observed from the corner of her eye. Turning to the doors of the chamber, she was puzzled to see several newly arriving Emperor's Guards step quietly in.

"In five years," the Emperor told them, "We may find that the unity of Oydrae will be under pressure. The provinces may be uneasy about throwing in their best troops to be mowed down by the Red Menace, here in the Capital Province, at the expense of depleting their defences on their own borders. They might rather, instead, let the Capital Province absorb the brunt of any attack and wait to fight a weakened force when it reaches them."

The Counsellors looked at each other with a look of mistrust that was only thinly disguised. Each was clearly pondering which of other's local province might yield to such a strategy.

Kenitra's eyes were drawn to a slight movement behind a curtain that hung across an alcove in the chamber. Two Emperor's Guards had emerged from behind the curtain and she could see the feet of several more, edging their way along it from behind.

"I rule," the Emperor declared, "As my father ruled and how his father ruled before him and how, before that, his mother ruled. The Emperors and Empresses have been the sole and singular authority of Oydrae for a thousand years."

Several of the Counsellors stood and voiced their loyalty to the Emperor and his family and asserted the unwavering support of their people in their

provinces and regions. The Emperor listened tolerantly, though with a degree of impatience, but eventually held up his hand to stem their declarations and Callibus, with clear exasperation, slapped the table for silence.

The Emperor met Callibus' eye and the other cocked an eyebrow. The Emperor grimaced and nodded, discretely, and pressed his lips into a thin line.

Callibus got to his feet and addressed those present: "Noble and honourable Counsellors, gathered here, pressing your cases to each be representing the "most loyal" of all in the Empire, I beseech you to understand that catastrophe is neither constrained nor curtailed by fine words"

By the expressions on the faces of the Counsellors, the intended offence was swiftly taken.

Callibus resumed, with barely diminished frankness: "With blood flowing in the streets of the Capital Province, the unwavering loyalty you describe - which we readily accept as sincere - may not be played out with equal commitment by soldiers fighting far from home."

"This is outrageous!", protested one of the more vocal Counsellors, starting to rise from his chair.

Callibus slapped himself on one cheek, in mock perplexity. In response to this gesture, as if this were a secret signal, there was the unmistakable sound of swords being drawn. Twenty of the Emperor's Guards had pulled their swords half way out of their scabbards. The protesting Counsellor, not yet fully out of his seat, suddenly froze in the air. He cast a wary glance at the soldiers and then flopped glumly back into his chair. There was a ripple of soft thuds as twenty swords returned to their resting places.

The Counsellors visibly stiffened, bristling with indignation. There was a heavy silence. The number of Emperor's Guards had increased substantially over the past few minutes. Their turquoise cloaks drawn ominously around themselves, concealing whatever weapons they might be carrying.

Several Counsellors looked slowly back and forth, up and down the table, at their peers, their faces like thunder. Some sat glowering at the soldiers contemptuously. Others sat, with arms folded, in defiance.

The door to the chamber swung open and the Captain of the Emperor's Guard walked in. briskly, and hurriedly made her way to the Emperor's side. She saluted the Emperor and handed him a piece of paper. The Emperor unfolded it and read it. He nodded gravely and passed it to Callibus. Callibus read it, scowled, and held it out, first for Kenitra to read and then to each of the two Wise Elders.

The Captain saluted again and backed away. Turning to her troops, she stretched out her right arm to its full extent and slapped it, twice, at the wrist with

the open palm of her left hand. Immediately, there were two loud thumps as all fifty Emperors Guards suddenly stomped to attention.

The Emperor's two sons, Zarr and Yant, traded looks of apprehension at the opposite end of the table. They both knew that the Captain's gesture indicated an overwhelming victory in a battle.

The Counsellors looked about them in evident disquiet

The Emperor slowly and deliberately sat back down and leaned back in his enormous, ornate chair. Calmly and deliberately he placed his hands on the arm of the chair. He nonchalantly slid his hands forward until they were gripping the carved heads of lions that decorated the front.

"The late, departed Carl Dreadmont was close friends with a number of you," Callibus announced. Callibus allowed the words to hang in the air. It was clearly less a statement than an allegation. None of the Counsellors moved a muscle. All of a sudden, Callibus was on his feet. He paced slowly - with precise, deliberate steps - to the far end of the table.

"The Emperor is grateful for your advice." Callibus told them, his footsteps echoing on the tiled floor.

"He is grateful for your guidance." Callibus affirmed, his heels tapping out his progress around the table.

"He is grateful for your insight." Callibus confided, the noise of his footwear audibly describing his leisurely procession.

Callibus gestured to the rank of 20 Emperor's Guards, facing them at attention, with their turquoise cloaks now swept back over their shoulders, to reveal their weapons: "These fine ladies and gentlemen are every bit as loyal as you are to the Emperor and to the future of Oydrae".

Callibus paused in his pacing and gave a sardonic chuckle, "In fact – and I'm not a critic, you understand – a number of them would claim that they are even **more** enthusiastic than **some** of you!"

The faces of the Counsellors were rigid and emotionless. None of them looked at anybody else. Instead they maintained their gaze directly at the paintings and tapestries on the walls across from them.

"This soldier," announced Callibus pointing to the woman nearest him, standing tall and athletic in her gleaming bronzed armour with her hand resting on the hilt of her sword, "Is extremely enthusiastic!".

The soldier remained completely impassive and motionless, the only trace of animation being her armour glinting, ever so slightly, in the torch light as

she breathed. The contours of the polished metal minimised and understated her bust beneath it, delineating and exaggerating, instead, the idealised muscle sculpture of a warrior.

"This soldier," declared Callibus, pointing to another member of the Emperor's Guard, further down the row, "Is also extremely enthusiastic!"

The soldier remained stoically composed and indifferent, as if they were a statue carved from stone.

Callibus turned to the Captain of the Emperor's Guard and asked: "Captain, which one of your soldiers would be willing to die to defend the life of the Emperor?"

The Commander's brows furrowed and, for the briefest of moments, a puzzled look flashed across her face as she replied, emphatically: "All of them!"

"And his Queen?"

"All of them.", replied the Captain.

"And his sons?"

"All of them.", she replied.

"Your soldiers come from all parts of the empire, Captain. Do they not have loyalties and obligations that might impact on executing their duty?", asked Callibus.

"My soldiers set aside **all** other allegiances when they join the Emperor's Guard and are loyal to the Emperor without any other considerations.", replied the Captain, failing to mask the merest hint of an edge to her tone.

"The integrity of your soldiers," replied Callibus, "Is absolutely **beyond** question, Captain."

Callibus turned back to the Counsellors, sat around the huge marble table, and spoke to them in a slow and precise manner: "The Emperor's Guard are soldiers. They behave like soldiers. They have a soldier's discipline. They serve the Emperor to the exclusion of all other considerations."

At this point, a few of the Counsellors permitted themselves the odd glance around to check on their colleagues' expressions and demeanour.

Callibus began to retrace his steps, pacing slowly and deliberately back the way he had come.

"We live in dangerous times," Callibus told them. He allowed his words to hang in the air for a few moments before resuming.

"If we were able to depend on everybody who serves the Emperor and his Queen with the same certainty as the Emperor's Guard...", Callibus began, before being suddenly interrupted by any angry outburst by one of the Counsellors.

"This is grossly offensive!", shouted the Counsellor, "This is vile and inflammatory talk! We are Counsellors to the Emperor!"

Nearby, another Counsellor voiced their fury: "It is scandalous that we are spoken to this way! It is disgraceful that our integrity is clearly being called into question!"

"We are not at war," Callibus confided, loudly, "But we need to *prepare* for war."

The Counsellors were stunned into silence.

Callibus held his arms out in an inverted 'V', his palms upwards, and gasped with theatrical exasperation, "We have had, what we can presume to be assassins, penetrate the palace."

Callibus looked around the table, inviting any contrary opinions, which were not evident, before continuing: "Such an intrusion must be regarded as compromising the safety of the Emperor."

Callibus looked around the table some more. There were no murmurs, but a lot of the faces were clearly showing displeasure, "You wish to argue about whether I am denting your pride...."

Around the table, teeth clenched, some snorts and barely perceptible growls were heard.

Yant and Zarr glanced sideways at each other and narrowed their eyes. Their thoughts could almost have flashed between themselves, because what each was thinking was suddenly clear to the other. This was a carefully choreographed and planned tactic they were witnessing from Callibus. The two brothers glanced to their sister at the opposite end of the table. Her scrupulously impassive expression was inscrutable, but the hint of something in her eyes told them everything they needed to know.

"Our enemies sweep relentlessly towards us, threatening our total destruction," Callibus shouted, "And we sit here, contemplating....", he turned to meet the eyes of the taller of the two Counsellors from Kalferna, "Which of you, gathered here, were conspiring with Carl Dreadmont!"

The Counsellor jumped to his feet, "Intolerable!", he screamed, trembling with rage and thrusting his finger at the end of his outstretched arm as Callibus.

The man's fellow from Kalferna, got up and, also, jabbed a finger at Callibus: "You are just a fixer! An arranger! A dabbler!", He derided, "You're shuffling pen pusher!"

"He!", Shouted the Emperor, never before having so much as raised his voice in the Counsel Chamber, "He, from this moment, is the Grand High Counsellor!"

The Counsellors were agog! Their jaws dropped opened and their eyes stared wide in disbelief. Callibus, himself, was not immune to the epidemic of incredulity. His head shot round to face the Emperor, who looked back, completely serene.

This time, Zarr and Yant fully turned to each other and one mouthed the word: 'What?'. The Queen could not suppress a little smile as they turned to her. Kenitra had known of a promotion for the loyal, unflappable, conscientious Callibus, but even she had not predicted it culminating in the spontaneous, spur of the moment *creation* of a high office!

The Counsellors abruptly found their voices and began to loudly vent their indignation.

"We are the Counsel!", one yelled.

"It is us who confer!", barked another.

"The Counsel is us!", protested a third.

"The Counsel is the Counsellors!", shouted one.

"Without us, there is no Counsel!", a particularly loud voice boomed.

"Really?", quipped Callibus, quickly recovering his composure, "You're all dismissed!"

The Counsellors were – at one and the same time - incensed, infuriated and completely flabbergasted, rising as one to shake their fists, roar their dissent and rumble with disgust!

"Absoon!", yelled the Captain of the Guard, using the ancient high speech for "defend".