

# Council

Vaeyssa climbed the last few steps to the clan hall at the apex of the tor. His heart skipped a beat as he realised he would soon see Laece again but he steeled himself against the confrontation he would have with the Queen. He looked down river and from this height he could see for miles over the canopy of the marsh forest. Way in the distance where the horizon turned blue he made out the city of Gual-sa with its sky-scraping central tower wreathed in cloud. Between that centre of civilisation and where he stood, individual hills punched up out of the trees and many had towns, some ruined and deserted, clinging to their slopes.

"Are you going to join us, Captain?" A commanding, female voice came from inside the hall.

"Majesty." Vaeyssa turned away from the view and entered the large, circular room. The Queen sat opposite the entrance, raised slightly on a platform so that even when seated she looked over the heads of her subjects. Vaeyssa had known many leaders and officers but none like the Queen. Whereas many were like pack leaders that ruled with strength and fear and were prepared to tear their enemies to pieces, the Queen was more like the leader of a herd: she was caring, clever and watchful but if provoked could take on the might of the strongest predator.

The Queen smiled at Vaeyssa as he joined the council and he inclined his head in response. His gaze fell on Laece sat on the Queen's right and his stomach flipped as he caught her looking back at him with her big, sky blue eyes. He looked away quickly and noticed he was the last to arrive. All the clan's Chieftains were present and amongst them Vaeyssa spotted Chaecychi the Nightwarder, the clan Sagi and clan Soothsayer.

"We should be able to keep this brief," the Queen began. "We seem to have several situations that need attention. Firstly, we need to discover where the Suqoya are coming from and evict them from our territory. Secondly, there seems to be a killer predator in our territory. We know for certain it took Uwenogh and we're assuming Taeiche as well. Thirdly, there's the disappearance of my daughter's maid, Ethyne. Fourth, there's the matter of Edighu and his haunted home and lastly Lofniatho appears to have let a necrowalker loose on us.

"Chieftain Thomneke will dedicate all his attention to the search for the Qoya and Ethyne," the Queen stared pointedly at Thomneke and Vaeyssa recognised the rebuke, "and we'll leave the matter of the predator in the capable hands of Chieftain Wythnae." The Queen nodded at Wythnae and he returned the gesture. "So that just leaves the haunting and the necrowalker to resolve."

The Queen paused and Vaeyssa spoke up, "Majesty, it would appear from investigation that Edighu was a Chaosmonger." A murmur passed through the gathering and several members frowned at Vaeyssa. "I found idols of the four devil deities secreted away in a hidden chamber," there were more

mutterings but Vaeysa ignored them, "so I'm treating the haunting as being related. It may be possible that we're dealing with a fiadrytch and the matter of the necrowalker could also be associated with Edighu."

The hall filled with a cacophony of voices shouting approval or indignation and several arguments began between the dissenting parties.

"Please control yourselves." The Queen's voice should've been drowned out in the verbal melee but instantly it brought order and the room quietened. "Thank-you." She looked at Vaeysa, "your conclusion may be right but you're also making some assumptions."

"Yes, your majesty, I agree but due to the nature of what we're dealing with I think it's beyond our expertise and I'm going to request a Hexhunter be brought in." Now that he'd said it he was determined to stand by his decision. Too often in the past he'd been dissuaded from a course of action by the Queen but this time he swore to himself he would stand as firm as a mountain.

The room remained silent but the unspoken communication was that of concern. Brows were furrowed, lips were pulled, eyes were skittish and bodies tensed but the Queen remained serene.

"Chaecychi," the Queen addressed the Nightwarder, "do you think it necessary?"

"No your majesty, I don't," she glanced at Vaeysa and saw the belligerence in his stare like a hungry predator, "we haven't been able to thoroughly search Edighu's home yet and there's no evidence to suggest the necrowalker is linked in any way to the haunting; it came about due to fate and not from someone's deliberate causation."

"Although once it was here, someone did open the door and let it out onto the clan," the Queen said.

"That's true."

The Queen paused in thought and Vaeysa stared at her. He wasn't going to shift in his stance. As the Captain of the Huaos-Dzaa contingent in the clan he had the right and power to bring in whoever he wanted and letting the clan know was just a courtesy and nothing else. No matter what the Queen wanted, he'd bring in the Hexhunter.

"This is what we'll do," the Queen looked at Cheacychi, "our Nightwarder will assist Vaeysa in a thorough investigation. We will ascertain as far as possible the truth behind this and only on conclusion of the investigation will we decide whether to bring in a Hexhunter."

"Your majesty..." Vaeysa interjected.

"Please, Captain, let me finish." Vaeysa fell quiet and the Queen turned her attention fully on him, "If you made a request and it turned out that

there is no link and both the haunting and necrowalker are resolved by our Nightwarder then your decision would not be looked on kindly by your superiors would it?"

Vaeyssa realised the Queen had a valid point, "No your majesty, it wouldn't."

"Then it is surely better to pursue this matter as far as possible ourselves before seeking help. The Nightwarder will assist you in your investigation and don't make your request until we've reviewed the conclusion of that."

Vaeyssa realised that the Queen was right, "Okay, your majesty."

"Good. Now give me your word that you'll wait until the end of the investigation."

It was a reasonable request to make. "On my honour, your majesty."

"Right, that's settled then. We'll reconvene tomorrow and, Thomneke, I'll expect some progress."

Chieftain Thomneke mumbled an acknowledgement as the Queen stared at him hard and the council members began to exit the hall. Vaeyssa strode out into the open and he started as he realised what he'd just agreed to. He couldn't believe it. How had it happened? He was required to report all such occurrences to his superior and bringing in the Hexhunter was the only logical thing to do. But he'd given the Queen his promise, on his honour, and he couldn't break it under any circumstance. Yet his loyalty was to the Huaos-Dzaa and his duty to them should come first so why couldn't he break his word to the Queen? He wrestled with his decision and his anger flared. He berated himself and told himself that he should write the report straight away but he knew he wouldn't go back on his oath. If he'd been his own junior he'd have slapped himself hard. How could this have happened?

She'd done it again. Oh, he was a mountain all right!