

Chapter Three

The next day, Vik sat in an enormous sea-green sofa-lounge in his palace tree's office, and dictated to a series of Messengers.

Messengers were men of great integrity and astonishing, eidetic memory. They were all members of one widespread family whose 'memory gene' traced back to the work of genetic scientists in the California Republic 600 years before.

Messengers were a guild and a clan. They never married outside the family for fear of losing the gene. The males worked for the government, the females for private business where they could keep a home and raise their children.

Messengers often carried a pouch of documents, but most of the empire's provinces and client chiefdoms depended on their total recall and inviolable honesty for sensitive and important document content.

It meant death to harm or seriously interfere with a Messenger whether he was on duty or not. An attempted bribe was instantly reported by any Messenger.

The last known instance of a Messenger violating his trust had occurred more than a century before, and he had been publicly beheaded by members of his inner family.

Messengers could not be tortured for information; when their pain reached a certain level they died. They were very cautious people. Accidents and disease killed them easily due to their low pain tolerance.

Vik wore his purple First Minister's robe of office, as usual, and the heavy First Minister's gold pendant.

A male secretary sat cross-legged on the deep amber grass carpet, taking down his words on a square paper leaf pad with an inkstick. Real paper was available, but it was too expensive for casual note-taking.

Vik noticed Robert Columbo, his first assistant, enter the large office.

Columbo knew he had First Minister Martin's attention. He pointed toward the ceiling and jabbed once.

Emperor Jusef Nodman wanted Martin.

Vik nodded and continued giving the Messenger instructions for the First Administrator of East Bama province.

Five minutes later, as the Messenger left, with the secretary, Vik asked Columbo, "What does he want?"

"I don't know. Quinn's alone with him. High policy, I suppose. No staff allowed."

"No word from the vines?" Vik referred to inter-office rumors, leaks

and paid informants. He had people in the staffs of every ministry, and one even close to the emperor. And there were informants in his lower staff, he was sure.

Palace intrigue always existed in power centers. The trick was to accept it and play the game well.

Columbo said cautiously, "Maybe that Quinn wants to break your monopoly on glow leafs. 'Empire defense requires---'"

Vik nodded sharply. "He's wanted that for ten years. But tell Deeks to snoop for special agent activity. Quinn is up to something."

Vik left his office by its private exit and emerged onto the ornate, windy, high ramp that curved up to the Emperor's Throne Room and office cluster. This giant-among-giants Center Tree of the five sacred Palace Trees soared upward into the sky, a living tower that dominated the empire city.

The Palace Trees had stood for five hundred years. Long ago their major branches had been spliced together to make the grove into a single, joined entity. Ramps and bridges linked the trees at various branch-cluster levels. Slave-powered, counterweighted elevators rose and descended.

Vik looked up at the clear blue sky...at the sun, for an instant. He enjoyed the feel of the afternoon warmth. August, and the temperature was only about 75 degrees. The new ice age continued. Reports told of the glaciers creeping further into the Great Lakes...now called The Ice Lakes.

Vik looked out over the masses of green foliage that hid all but occasional areas of ground. There were broad, crowded lanes and paths down there, markets and shops, lion pens, pleasure huts, stone-walled banks encircling bank-owned business trees...

The largest bank, The River Trust, was controlled by Martin Investments.

He turned and slowly, gripping the elaborate, dead wood railing for safety, limped up the ramp to the next level. He stopped once to absentmindedly massage the fingers of his right hand as if they were arthritic.

When he entered the Emperor's outer offices the clerks and lower officials spread their hands, palms up, and bowed their heads.

The Emperor's Private One, a graying, stolid man in a living toga with gold thread woven between the pale yellow fibers, smiled and said, "Defense Minister Quinn is with him, eating a little. Would you care for something? Mexkan wine? Zona cake?"

First Minister Martin's favorite small foods were known and stocked.

"No. Nothing now." Vik was mildly surprised when the Private One by-passed the usual private conference room and led him through to the

Emperor's personal quarters.

The man opened a gold-leafed door for him. Vik limped into a luxurious, wedge-shaped study. The multi-windowed outer wall provided a view of a third of the city. The transparent membranes flexed from the breeze outside. At this height the tree swayed very slightly.

Emperor Nodman and Defense Minister Quinn sat close together on a purple, living sofa. They were both small men.

Nodman, wrinkled and skull-bare, with sharp dark fox eyes, his thin old body stick-like in the layers of his red silk toga, sat rigid and tense, fighting visible trembling. A heavy gold cross hung from a gold chain around his scrawny neck.

Quinn, still strong and firm in a green military tunic with gold piping and a woven gold belt, sat self-important and proud with diamond and jade rings on every finger. A cross formed by two gold swords hung from his neck by a short, braided, gold cord.

Nodman turned his bare head and rictus smiled. "Martin." He spoke a fraction off-tone, a fraction too late, and Vik easily caught it, instantly knowing the 'investigation' was known and approved by the Emperor.

Nodman gestured to an opposing, overstuffed living chair. "Sit. Wine?" A bottle of dark red Yimini sat with cakes, meats, fruits, sweets, and cheeses on a low, wheeled, killed-mahogany cart between the sofa and chair.

A deaf-mute servant stood ready to serve. He knew all the ministers' preferences.

Quinn lifted a palm in greeting and casual respect. "These melon pods are exquisitely ripe, Martin. Try one." His voice was rough and gravelly.

Vik limped to the chair. "No, my stomach is hurting again." When he sat he still seemed a giant in comparison to the smaller men. Over the centuries of his life his size had become more and more of a problem as ordinary mortals became smaller as their diets deteriorated and as they ate less and less dairy products.

The living chair groaned softly as his weight crushed down on its soft cushion.

Vik abstractedly flexed his right hand. "Every few years I have to go to the mineral springs of northern Bama for a few weeks." He closed his eyes and smiled with memory. "Soak in that hot, soothing, bubbling water, and drink it hot day after day..."

Once away from Norlins, on the way east, Martin's small entourage and armed escort would be set upon by a ruthless band of ransom criminals, and Jak Martin, First Minister to Emperor Nodman, would be captured, and

a huge ransom demanded. But even if the ransom was paid, Jak Martin would never be seen or heard of again.

Vik had staged similar exits for himself many times.

Nodman and Quinn exchanged glances. The Emperor said, "This body of mine is dying. Every day I live with pain." He pressed his lower belly. "Pain that only hemp and zizu powder can tame for a while." He glowered. "But I don't leave my work. The Empire needs me. It needs you, too, Martin."

Vik said, "There is nothing critical on the map. Columbo and my inner staff are able to function without me, easily, for two ten-days."

Nodman didn't argue. He slipped off on another subject. "Quinn has just given me reports of tribes coming down from the Kota Territories into Braska. They're being forced south by savages from still further north."

Vik nodded. "All of Canda is virtually uninhabitable now, even in summer. We can't blame them."

Quinn said with his rough voice, "We have to stop the Kota tribes. They're tough and hungry and vicious. They're slaughtering our Mighty Christ people in Soo Falls."

Vik looked out of the windows and followed the brown curve of a giant tree limb. He said, "Fall back to the North Plat River line. That can be defended with five thousand fewer men for a while. Send five thousand south to Kansa City for rest and as a reserve. And send five thousand of our existing Kansa reserve to defend the Plat."

Nodman pursed his thin lips. His keen old eyes shifted to Quinn.

Quinn traced an old scar on his forehead. "That is the obvious military move. But the problem is now more than military. It is also religious ...and complicated. The Kota tribes are also fanatics. They could defend themselves from those remnant Canda savages, if they wanted to. But they are also driven south by their religion." His eyes lanced at Vik.

Vik continued flexing his right hand. "The Kun-Zar Quest. I know. I've seen the new analysis. It's valid."

Nodman's eyes widened. "You admit Kun-Zar exists?"

Vik smiled. "No. I mean the Kota's religion. They believe one of their ancient rulers, Kun-Zar, was a man who never died and who left them to live in the magic south, in the land of easy food, easy climate and easy slaves. They managed to grow in numbers until now---the past fifty years---they are strong enough to follow Kun-Zar south, into this promised land. They believe he is here, waiting for them."

Nodman said, "Our Mighty Christ would not allow---"

Quinn interrupted the Emperor. "How could they believe such

idiocy?”

Vik replied, “Self-interest. They are poor. We are rich. Their priests say Kun-Zar will welcome them and rule them again forever, but they must conquer us to prove they deserve him again. They believe they are the Chosen Ones, the peoples Chosen by Kun-Zar. They believe they cannot be defeated.”

Quinn snapped, “We beat them at Pierre!”

“But not for long. They rallied, we retreated, outflanked.”

Nodman was impatient. “Martin, from all your learning and knowledge of ancient times, is it possible that this Kun-Zar does exist?”

“No. Kun-Zar is a convenient myth, a creation of the Kota priests and chiefs to motivate their tribes, to justify their wars and raids and looting and slaughters. They must think of themselves as special leaders of special people, above the law, in that special morality where the end justifies the means and where might makes right.”

Nodman said, “But *we* are...”

Vik continued, daring to interrupt the dying old man, needing to say this for inner reasons he still didn’t fully understand. “And because they imagine themselves Chosen, above the law, superior to the law, they realize all other tribes---all other peoples---are inferior, lesser creatures, who may be killed without remorse or pity, because all Others aren’t quite human. All Others are a form of animal.”

Quinn smiled and grated, “Are you saying the Kotas are our equals?”

Vik smiled. “I’m saying that dehumanizing your enemy has always been a common government propaganda technique...and necessity.”

Nodman said, scowling, “I’m not sure I understand all this chosen peoples talk. But I’ve been told by God scholars that maybe a Christ-chosen man lived in the California Republic who may have lived many lives under different names and who may have led the ancient scientists in creating the Junto trees and many other wonders. Could he have been Kun-Zar, too? Could he still---” He abruptly hissed with pain and sat with clenched fists, eyes closed.

Quinn and Vik were silent with necessary respect and sympathy.

Nodman slowly relaxed. He said to the room, hand upheld, “Nothing!” To Quinn and Vik he said softly, “Mighty Christ, how I hate dying!”

Vik nodded.

Quinn said, “You must not die. The Empire could not last a year without your wise leadership.”

Nodman glared at Quinn. “Enough toadying. And I’ve had enough of

this Kun-Zar, Kota mess, for now. I want to spend some time this afternoon with my sweet mouth girl.”

Quinn grinned.

Vik remained expressionless.

Nodman took several slow, deep breaths. He was able to relax. He said, “I seek pleasure as compensation for my pain. Mighty Christ owes me that.”

Quinn said, “Highest One, you deserve every pleasure.”

Nodman smiled. “And I take it.” He said to Vik, “Ah, Martin, Quinn can tell you how fine she is. I sent her to him for a night last ten-day.” He fisted his bony, veined hand. “My wilted stem grows to a tree between those cunning lips. That dancing tongue...”

Quinn nodded vigorously. “Fantastic skill. I was ten years older by morning.” Quinn paled.

But Emperor Nodman was now impervious to accidental insults or implied mortality. “Yes, yes! She can wither any man---even old Kun-Zar!” He fox-glanced at Vik. “You’ll see. I’ll send her to you tonight, Martin. She’ll swallow your big pole and you’ll live in the valley of the Sun.”

Vik thought quickly for a few seconds and decided not to attempt a refusal. He grinned and inclined his head. “Thank you, Highest One. Tomorrow my servants will find me too weak to be of use to the Empire.”

Vik was sure the little Chinese girl would be required to find out certain things about him. It would be a pleasant, challenging evening.

Nodman chuckled, but his amusement ended as he pressed his right hand to his belly. He promised, “She’ll be there.” He changed subject again. “Now what about those crystal slabs from Nork? They’re the key element of my tomb.”

Vik said, “They’re at the temple now. Work will begin late tomorrow. Columbo has arranged a triumphant ceremony for noon tomorrow. The survivors of the expedition will be honored by your presence and will present you with the thirty-six slabs they managed to take to the ship. Captain Cacola will make a speech recounting his crew’s adventures on the journey.”

Nodman complained, “It will take hours!”

Quinn growled, “Incredible that those old maps were accurate and the crystal still there.”

Vik replied, “The older the map the more likely its accuracy. Ancient books in my library show a picture of a huge structure, five times taller than this tree, constructed almost entirely of blocks and slabs of a kind of crystalline plastic. Impervious to wear and temperature. It wasn’t a long

branch to expect some to still be there. The survivors of the Bio-War weren't capable of--"

Nodman suddenly clawed at his loose, red silk toga at his belly and bent over. He gestured urgently at the attending servant. "Pipe!"

The slave began swiftly to prepare a pipe of hemp and purple zizu powder. He mixed in a heavy portion of the addictive, pain-killing zizu.

Nodman bent over farther. He whimpered with agony. "*I don't want to die!*"

Vik said unwisely, "Every man must die."

Nodman swiveled narrowed, pain-filled eyes to Vik, and the wrinkled, bony old face showed naked hate and raw envy for a revealing, uncontrolled instant.

Then the servant handed the Emperor the pipe, lit, ready, and the old man greedily sucked in air and purple smoke. He held the powerful mixture in his lungs and waved away his Private One who had hurriedly entered the room, concerned.

There were eyes and ears in these walls, too.

That did not surprise Vik. The Emperor lived with at least two loyal warriors watching him and whoever he was with, day and night, during sleep, even during his times of passion. Every wall in the palace trees was riddled with peepholes and listening points.

Now, obviously, Nodman and Quinn strongly suspected him of being Kun-Zar. They were not fools. They had a plan, a sequence, which was in operation. They had to be sure before they acted against the second most powerful man in the Empire.

Vik relished the contest, the danger. Within limits.

Emperor Nodman was visibly relaxing as the hemp-zizu smoke infused his body. He took the pipe from his mouth and said, "Leave me. Tomorrow..." His eyes closed.

Vik rose and limped to the door. Quinn showed a palm and let him leave first.