

# Chapter 7

Abruptly, Tarquin and Sarquoina fell quiet, both standing perfectly still like statues. They both stared intently into the distance. Saneeth drew in breath to speak, but Tarquin held up his finger for silence. Saneeth closed his mouth, again, and turned his head to follow Tarquin's gaze.

Without looking, Tarquin reached around himself and took hold of a thin pole that was propped there. Lifting it above his head, the cotton bag that hung from the ring at its top drooped limply down. Suddenly, the bag flicked upwards for a moment before flopping back down again.

Tarquin quickly lowered the pole and offered the bag to Sarquoina, who reached into it carefully withdrew its contents.

"Word from the North!", the Grand High Shaarn, announced triumphantly, gesturing to her cupped hands.

With exquisite care, Sarquoina revealed a tiny bat held lightly in her fingers. The bat promptly flopped itself backwards onto her palm, face up, wings casually thrown wide apart, waiting patiently. The little creature's theatrical cooperation was the result of both meticulous training and of self-interest. It had learned that the sooner the next step was concluded, the sooner it would receive its reward.

Tarquin reached across and gingerly extended the bat's diminutive little leg. Then, taking some miniature tools from a bag in his pocket, he gently unhooked a tiny little cylinder.

Sarquoina delicately dropped the bat back into the bag and pulled both bag and hoop off the top of the pole. She slid the bag from the hoop and handed it to Saneeth, who had appeared at her side. Saneeth walked across to a wooden box on the wall, opened a little door in its front and placed the bag into the box. He then put several drops of a sweet liquid from a bottle onto a stick, slipped it into the box and closed the door.

Tarquin reached into his tool bag and picked out a pair of wooden beads. Each had a minuscule pin embedded into its end. He used the pins to first remove the metal stopper from the top of the message cylinder and then to tease out the end of the message. Tarquin held out the cylinder to Sarquoina, who carefully pinched the tip of the message between her fingernails and slid it out.

Sarquoina uncurled the note and wrapped it around a polished wooden rod, using a pair of metal rings to hold it in place. Next, she lit a candle from a night lantern and placed it on the table. Carefully and methodically, she squeezed the

acidic juice of a small, yellow berry all the way along the note, before holding it the rising column of hot air coming from the candle.

Tarquin and Saneeth watched her work, deftly and purposefully, and each allowed the hint of a smile to dance on their lips.

Sarquoina's eyes widened as the message on the slither of paper began to reveal itself and she looked up at Tarquin with a troubled expression.

Tarquin's brows knotted and his face fell. Sarquoina held his gaze, her mind in turmoil, then looked back at the message with evident despair.

"Your father," she said, "He is dead. Slain by the Emperor."

Tarquin's jaw fell open. "This can't be true!", he said, knowing that that there would have been no doubt about a report like this, "His mission was to do only good. His faith required it."

Sarquoina looked at her husband with eyes filled with love and overflowing with apology for having been the one to voice this news.

Tarquin shook his head in disbelief and said, blankly: "He was a priest."

"Dreadmont was your father's accuser." she continued, reading the remainder of the message, "Dreadmont, however, is also dead. He was executed soon after your father, at the Emperor's command."

Tarquin's face contorted with incredulity, then – as successive waves of thought registered on it – it passed from puzzlement to insight, from outright bafflement to brazen fury and then to exasperation.

Tarquin put his head in his hands, raised it, grimacing, and said: "It doesn't make sense. My father would not have revealed his true faith to them. He would have let them believe that he shared their own primitive superstitions. They would have had no reason to harm him!"

He took the hand that Sarquoina's offered and put it to his lips and kissed it, then he continued: "My father was there to watch and to wait. He already knew that the visitors from the furthest South had set off Northwards, up through the Hollow Lands. We sent him word of this a whole moon cycle ago. He would have been waiting for a messenger to arrive in the Capital City from the West. The woman with green eyes who, the visitors said, had been foretold."

"The visitors have a common enemy with the Emperor," Saneeth said, "and – in addition – they have an enemy all of their own, as well."

Saneeth referred to the people the visitors had called 'The Stick People', because they were all very tall and thin. They had appeared out of the valleys from the mountains, one Spring, having crossed the high snow caps immediately after the thaw. They were laying siege to the visitors' Eastern flank while the ones they referred to as 'The Red Menace' attacked from the West.

"Fighting on two fronts," Tarquin replied, "The visitors – despite their fearsome weaponry - would not wish to incur the wrath of Oydrae and come into conflict with the Emperor, thus jeopardising their expedition."

"The Red Menace," Saneeth announced, gravely, "Are the enemy of everybody! They are the enemy of civilisation, itself!"

"They are the enemy of our God," Sarquoina said, pulling Tarquin's hand to her and grasping it with both of her own, "They are the enemy of the Golden Sheer. They are the enemy of the Oydrae of old. They are the enemy of the new Oydrae of today."

"They are the ink black cloud that brings eternal darkness! Just like the prophecies warned.", declared Tarquin.

Saneeth was silent and looked deeply contemplative. Tarquin and Sarquoina turned to him and he suddenly seemed to spring awake.

"The Red Menace are the enemy of everybody, but – let's not forget, they are not alone in that respect." said Saneeth, "The Rebels whom we fight all across the Empire are everybody's enemy, too. They are our enemies from North to South and from East to West. They want to topple the Capital City and return to the days before the Empire when we were just a mass of tiny localities jostling and squabbling with each other."

"They despise anything that looks like organisation!", agreed Tarquin, "They have attacked the major cities in all of the regions across Oydrae and the Capital City, itself, trying to return us all to chaos and disorder!"

"They attacked the Capital City, in force, only a month ago," Saneeth growled, "They were put down by the army, not nearly hard enough, and by the Emperor's Guards. There are rumours that they infiltrated the Palace, itself."

"My father would have nothing to do with them!", Tarquin protested.

"No, of course not," Saneeth conceded, "But it would make the Emperor worried and anxious. Dreadmont has always been delighted to kill just about anybody who has the wrong expression on their face!"

"The Emperor has killed my father." Tarquin said through gritted teeth, "My line, my house, my family, all the Shaarns, at every level, have sworn a blood oath of allegiance to the Emperor. My loyalty to him is total and absolute."

Tarquin walked back to the edge of the balcony and looked out over the green landscape beyond it. He sighed a long sigh.

"I am Grand High Shaarn.", He declared, "None of the Shaarns will lift a finger against the Emperor. Neither of the High Shaarns will lift a finger against the Emperor. They would not dream of it. They are all sworn. I will not break my oath, either. There will be no war between The Golden Sheer and the Capital City."

"If the Red Menace reach here," Saneeth proclaimed, "Then all of this will be reduced to ash. Everything will be burned to the ground. The trees, the crops, the houses, absolutely everything will be put to the torch."

Tarquin turned around to face them both, leaning back on the stone balcony rail. He nodded gravely, "They will tumble down every wall of this palace until not one stone remains resting on another. They are destroyers, wreckers, bringers of devastation!"

Sarquoina and Saneeth exchanged troubled glances.

"This red abomination will take at least five years to arrive, according to the visitors, maybe even ten," said Saneeth, "There is time enough to exact punishment on the Capital City without going to war and without breaking your oath to the Emperor. There is time enough to extract atonement for your father's death."

Tarquin brooded, sullenly, before replying: "I will have revenge for the death of my father. They will pay in blood."