

CHAPTER 4

Blood stains his hands and streaks the grey of his trousers. His knees are damp, sodden by the dark, sticky mess of death surrounding the unconscious Wyvern nobleman. The stink of human waste hangs thick on the air, the voided bowels of those who have died, but there is no time to be disgusted. Enchei tears a surcoat from the body of one fallen guard, uses a knife to cut away the bloodied front. This he wads up and, pulling Narin's blood-slicked hand away from the nobleman's crotch, he presses the fresh bandage against the wound.

'He's still alive?' Narin hears himself ask as the first compress peels jerkily away from his palm and flops to the ground.

'He'll live,' Enchei confirms, 'but this needs proper bandaging.'

'Can we carry him? It's not far to Dragon District.'

Enchei is silent for a while. There's a smear of blood on his forehead – not his own, he's just wiped away the sweat of his exertions with bloodied hands.

'No, I have a better idea,' he says at last.

'Better than taking him to safety?'

The tattooist nods. 'I know a woman, not far from here. A midwife, she'll have clean bandages.'

'You'd trust her over a Great House's finest doctors?'

Enchei shrugs. 'I'll do it myself.'

'Yourself?' Narin looks around at the bodies of their attackers. He is reminded of how quickly Enchei killed them, the quick efficiency with which he made corpses of six killers. 'How are we even alive?'

'Told you I was a soldier,' Enchei says gruffly. 'Was a damn good one, 'cept the bit about taking orders from fools.'

'And you learned to wrap wounds too?'

'In war men get hurt quite a lot.'

Enchei looks the nobleman up and down and for the first time Narin does so properly. The man they've saved is not typical of his countrymen;

he's short and rotund with a thick neck and lighter skin than most Wyverns. Without warning the tattooist grabs Narin's hand and uses it to take the place of his own. That done he begins to strip off the nobleman's once-grand jacket to reveal the plain linen shirt beneath.

'Why?'

'Why? All those weapons lying around. Bound to be an accident o' some sort.'

'Why dress it yourself? Why take his jacket off?'

The tattooist's eyes seem to shine now, each tiny vein of his iris edged in light. 'Make him less obvious.'

In his dream Narin hears the words echo distantly as Enchei begins to fade into the dark shadows behind – all except his eyes, which remain bright and terrifying.

'Why?'

'He's been castrated,' he hears Enchei say as his view begins to recede and he finds himself in front of the narrow, whitewashed house belonging to Enchei's midwife friend. 'You realise how that's seen where he's from? He'll be disgraced, for this and running up debts. Those were enforcers I'm sure, out to punish a man who couldn't pay, given what they've done.'

'You want to hide it,' Narin says as the door opens and a wizened face peers and ushers them in, the darkness enveloping them all.

'Might as well try, give the man a chance. Without that he's done – most likely he'll kill himself through shame and his family'll forget he was ever one of 'em. I ain't saying this'll work; you need to find his steward or manservant, hope they're loyal and competent enough to keep the secret.'

'He'll be the best friend you ever have,' Enchei says from somewhere in the dark. 'Forever thankful – and in this life that's worth as much as gold.'

Narin woke with the dawn. Grainy, feeble light slipped through the angled slats of the window shutters along with a damp breath of wind. He scowled and rolled over to face the open doorway that led into the main room. A moment of panic gripped him, but then he heard the soft exhalation and relaxed again. The goshe was still there; he hadn't woken and fled in the night.

He eased himself up off the floor where he'd spent the night, barely sleeping, while his unconscious guest remained in the bed next door. A sharp ache behind his eyes blossomed as soon as he moved; his limbs were sluggish and heavy with fatigue. Unsteady for a moment until he found his balance, Narin straightened and stretched his arms up

to brush the whitewashed ceiling, slowly tilting to each side to work the stiffness from his back. He grimaced at the twinge in his right shoulder when his arm was fully extended and rolled it in slow circles to work the discomfort out. A nagging injury from the dachan court, his shoulder hadn't enjoyed a night on the wooden floor.

Narin crossed to a small washstand and scrubbed away the greasy feeling on his face, blinking at the reflection in his small mirror as though not recognising himself. Once his brain had caught up, Narin wiped a cloth over his chest and armpits. The damp chill raised goosebumps over his skin until he turned away again, swinging his arms to shake off the last vestiges of sleep.

Opening the window shutters, Narin stared out across a city rendered ethereal and alien by the blanket of mist. The familiar lines of buildings and streets were broken up by a tattered curtain of white, the waters of the Crescent almost entirely obscured. The Imperial District was an island three miles across – nestled in the protective embrace of the mainland that extended around four-fifths of its shore – with the Crescent that band of water separating the two.

His eyes were inexorably drawn to the huge structure that dominated his view, one that even fog could rarely hide. The great arcs of the Tier Bridge rose high in the sky; as white as ice and, to Narin's eye, just as cold. The ornate grey towers of the temples on both banks looked tiny in comparison to the bridge's oppressive bulk, curving slightly left as it stretched to the far bank in House Dragon's district.

The bridge had no straight lines; each tier was suspended from a twisting spray of white arches that rose from each corner and crossed diagonally to the opposite corner. Anchored to the cold forest of arching supports on each bank, ramshackle houses ran along the shore behind a bustling network of market stalls.

Against the haze of morning Narin could make out little of the white flags bearing the Emperor's sun at the nearer end, but the black and red dragons on the far side remained visible. Out of deference to the Emperor's divine blood there was one fewer of the dragons, but the largest was a banner forty feet long that ensured no one could forget where the power in the Empire lay.

He closed the shutters again and pulled on a clean set of grey trousers and jacket. Dressing quickly, Narin snatched up his stave from beside his bed, running fingers over the familiar smooth wood as he headed

into the other room. The goshe lay on the bed in the same position he had been the previous day, his breathing faint against the sounds outside the quarters. Narin watched him a moment longer before turning to the door where Enchei had hung a slate the previous night. On it was a brief greeting and instructions that Mistress Sheti would be looking in on him occasionally during the day.

Most likely it wouldn't stop the man leaving if he woke, but Sheti was right that an Investigator – of all people – couldn't keep an injured man tied up in his assigned quarters. Politeness might surprise a street-fighter and make him think twice about escaping, Narin guessed, while a rope would be unlikely to stop him if he was determined.

'So who is the moon?' Narin asked the goshe softly. 'Is it you? Someone you answer to? Just what are you going to tell me when you wake up?'

There was no response and Narin shrugged, pocketing the piece of paper they'd found in the goshe's pockets the night before. He went to the stove on the other side of the room and opened the pantry cupboard. There was little left in there after Enchei's efforts the previous night so Narin contented himself with taking a swallow of weak wine before finding a twig to scrub at his teeth.

With one last look at the goshe, he slipped his stave through a loop behind his shoulder and ran it through until the flattened end nestled in a small pocket at the bottom of his jacket. Outside, the air was muted and still, the sounds of a city waking to the day softened by the mist. He guessed it was an hour after dawn as he headed down to the compound's high gate, greeting the other two Investigators also leaving.

'Narin!' the ebullient younger of the two called out. 'A bad morning for the early shift, eh?'

'Morning, Diman!' Narin said with a forced smile. 'And you, Nesare. Not keen on finding a half-eaten body before lunch then?'

Nesare snorted. He was a tall, willowy young man, but with an old head on his shoulders. 'You're as bad as Diman – worse, in fact, you're a native. There's shit-all chance any demon crawled out of the Crescent last night; it's rare enough in winter let alone spring.'

'Demons are always hungry,' Narin countered with a wink at Diman, 'well-known fact that – and souls taste just as good in any weather, the blood keeps them warm.'

'Pah, now you're just winding him up,' Nesare said. 'Keep it up then. Try that crap on your Lawbringer and see how it helps your appointment!'

They headed out onto the near-deserted streets, turning away from the Tier Bridge until the Imperial Palace appeared above the houses to dominate the view. As the sonorous clang of bells at the temple of Smith announced the morning hour, soon echoed by a hundred other temple bells across the city, they reached the great paved expanse of Lawbringer Square and the pale walls of the Palace of Law.

Grey gulls circled above the square, dozens of them crying and wheeling as though fearful to land. The three Investigators slowed and halted, his two companions glancing nervously at Narin. Up ahead was a figure dressed all in white, hands behind his back as though standing to attention, with an ornate black pistol-sheath at his waist. He was quite still, untouched by the movement all around him and looking directly at them – a Lawbringer, emissary of the Emperor himself and living embodiment of Imperial law.

Held cross-wise behind the Lawbringer's back was a white ash stave similar to those the Investigators carried. Few Lawbringers carried such a weapon and none could wield it so well as this one, but Narin still found himself resenting the sight of it. The majority wore swords; elegant and deadly weapons that were the symbol of their authority as much as a tool for punishment. But even here, in this place of justice and equality, some were above the rest.

Do you even know you do it? Narin wondered. You don't deign to carry the sword of a Lawbringer; do you know how the rest of us see that? We just see the guns – always the guns and the reminder you're above us all. Lawbringer you've become, noble caste you've always been.

A gust of wind brought a few drops of rain pattering down over them and that proved enough to stir the three into action once more. The other two Investigators bowed and made to leave, but Narin caught the arm of one and held him back. The young man frowned but made no complaint as Narin also bowed and at last the man in white spoke.

'Good morning, Investigator. You have business with Investigator Diman?'

Narin glanced at the man he'd held back. 'I do, Lawbringer – a moment only, if I may?'

Lawbringer Rhe inclined his head and adopted a statue-still pose of a man prepared to wait all day – so motionless he could have been one of the statues of their patron God, Lord Lawbringer, which looked down from all sides of the square. No wasted movement or instinctive

questions – the man’s ability to hold a position and fade into the background had always unnerved Narin. For once, however, he was thankful for his superior’s unnaturally calm nature.

Narin had to remind himself that all of the Gods had once been mortal men and women. In the earliest days of the Empire a king and queen had found the secret to immortality and ascended into the heavens. Exactly how they did so remained the greatest mystery the Empire had to offer, but their closest cadre of advisers had joined them in the years to follow. Over the next centuries that passed others had also been granted their own divine constellations by the Gods, after achieving enlightenment through the perfection of some art or skill. Unflappable and a man of unswerving purpose, Rhe was considered by many novices and Investigators to be halfway to the stars.

‘Diman,’ Narin muttered quickly, ‘you’re stationed within the Palace still?’

The younger man nodded. ‘Another moon still, why?’ He was five years younger than Narin and still in training, so he spent half of the year on administrative duties.

‘Have you heard any strange stories about the goshe in the last few days?’

‘Goshe? I, ah, no – not that I recall.’

Narin nodded. ‘If you do, could you tell me? I don’t have anything more than that for you – only a rumour I don’t want to share before I’ve got some sort of evidence.’

‘Share? At all?’ Diman couldn’t help but look up at the motionless Lawbringer a few yards away.

‘With anyone but him,’ Narin said with a reassuring smile. ‘I wanted to catch you before getting into the explanation.’

The look of relief on Diman’s face was clear. Like most Investigators, his awe of Rhe bordered on reverence. None would dare incur the wrath of a man who had once fought his way into a warrior compound in Dragon district in pursuit of a noble murderer – disarming seven soldiers ordered to attack him before calmly shooting the criminal between the eyes as the man levelled a musket.

‘Goshe. Right.’

With another bow to Lawbringer Rhe, Diman hurried away across the square to the jutting portico of the Palace of Law, leaving the two men facing each other.

‘The younger Investigators still see me as some sort of hero then?’
Narin coughed in surprise. ‘Ah, yes, Lawbringer. They all do, pretty much.’

‘I had hoped that would fade,’ Rhe said.

There was no expression on his face, just a detached calm that others saw as a cold aristocrat’s indifference. Ever the investigator, Rhe viewed the entire world with a sober, analytical mind – never letting emotion cloud his conclusions.

A tall and muscular man, Rhe was not a native of the Imperial City. Once a noble son of House Brightlance, a major House under the Eagle hegemony to the north-east, Rhe’s skin and pale cropped hair were dusted a faint grey-blue while his eyes were as grey and unyielding as steel.

He took a step forward, as light and lithe as a cat. Knowing the man’s mannerisms after over a year of assignment together, Narin’s eyes darted to the stave Rhe still held behind his back just as the Lawbringer brought it around with a crisp movement and tucked the weapon under his right arm.

‘Goshe? You have a story to tell me?’

Narin nodded. ‘More of a request really.’

‘Noted.’ Rhe nodded towards the street Narin had just come from. ‘I have asked for the long patrol today, you can tell me as we walk.’

Narin tried not to glower. He knew perfectly well what the long patrol meant and why Rhe had requested it – an incident the previous week where his temper had got the better of him. They would spend the day on a slow tour of the city gathering news from every House guardpost and Lawbringer watchtower, which meant dealing with officials of every rank and caste. If there was any crime to be investigated in the city today it would be the chewed-on remains of people taken under cover of fog or murdered drunks, yet still Narin knew which task he would prefer.

‘I did apologise to the man,’ he muttered, feeling like a chastened child.

‘Indeed you did,’ Rhe said, ‘and the words were all perfectly acceptable.’

‘But my tone was not?’

The Lawbringer inclined his head. ‘A child could have done better, Narin. That you thought the man an idiot was perfectly reasonable

given the circumstances. That you failed to hide your opinion of a man in the warrior caste was foolish.’ Rhe took a step forward, the smile fading. ‘That you allowed such an opinion to colour your judgement remains unforgivable.’

Easy for you to say, Narin thought, ducking his head in acknowledgement. Few men are above you.

His gaze alighted on the pistol at Rhe’s hip. The Lawbringer was third son to a lord of House Brightlance – a family of middling status among that nation’s rulers. Though he had renounced his family and inheritance when he joined the Lawbringers, Rhe’s caste remained and he could own a gunpower weapon. If Narin ever reached the same rank, he would still always be of the craftsman caste. It should be honour enough for someone of his low birth to be allowed a sword, apparently.

‘So, the favour?’ Rhe asked as he started off, indicating Narin should fall in beside him.

‘I have addresses to check – I don’t know for what, but I hope to discover a link between them.’

‘Interesting. Does it take us far out of our way?’

He shook his head. ‘The instructions seem simple enough, assuming I’m reading them correctly.’

‘Then how could I refuse? I must trust the judgement of an Imperial Investigator if I am to evaluate it.’ Rhe said in a level tone that Narin had to hope was intended as playful. ‘Let us hope they’re the addresses of palaces, to give you a little practice on that front too.’

Ah, humour. Maybe Enchei’s right about him after all, Narin thought glumly. ‘Thank you, Lawbringer.’

‘In the meantime, some background information please. We have a long walk, no need to spare me the details.’

Narin took a deep breath. *All the details? Not with my judgement recently.* ‘Of course. Tell me, have you ever spoken to a God?’

Rhe hesitated, surprise flashing across his face at the unexpected question. ‘A strange thing to ask, even if half the novices would be keen to hear the answer. However – no, I have not.’

Narin nodded as they continued back the way he had come, heading for the Tier Bridge where they could cross onto the spur of land on which House Dragon’s palazzos stood. The first address was not far from the other end of the bridge.

‘Turns out, you’re not missing much.’

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The brass bell chimed. Kesh unknotted her fingers and rose from the bench, ignoring the nudge against her legs as the person beside her slid up into the end position. She had been there more than an hour and her legs were stiff, but Kesh forced herself to step purposefully forward. She'd watched some lurch from that seat and almost fall over the course of the hour, while others had spent what seemed like an age getting their balance before advancing – long enough that some had tried to take their place and further delayed everyone by sparking an argument.

With as much poise as she could muster Kesh walked up to the desk and bowed to the official sat behind it.

'Good morning, Mistress,' the man said, not rising but indicating one of the stools on Kesh's side. 'Please, sit as you wish.'

'Thank you, sir,' she replied as warmly as she could manage. After that damn bench, sitting was the last thing she wanted to do, but she had no wish to dismiss his courtesy and eased herself down onto the stool.

She saw the official was religious caste by his collarless coat – though not actually a priest himself, given his head was not shaved. Most high-castes would have expected her to stand and look at the ground the whole while. In the last hour of observing him, trying to fathom what sort of man she would be speaking to, Kesh had realised he cared little for caste stricture, but a lot for manners.

The official carefully laid his polished brass pen on the wood rack to his left and leaned forward, elbows on the desk's leather surface and fingers steepled. He was a small man, as most Moons were; well past his middle years and the tiny crinkles of his polished brown skin possessed a curious white sheen. Kindly eyes looked large in his face beneath prominent, bushy eyebrows.

'You are of the Imperial House?' the official inquired after taking in every detail of Kesh's face and clothes.

She shook her head. 'No, sir, the Harbour Warrant.'

'Of course,' he said with a smile, 'I should have guessed – that bench is designed to be uncomfortable, I often suspect. Only sailors are steady on their feet straight away.'

Kesh nodded. 'I served a few of my father's seasons on a merchant ship.'

'Ah, I thought you a bit young for a full term. So Mistress, what service may House Moon do you today?'

'I ... I'm looking for advice I suppose.'

‘Very well; don’t believe what young men say after a few drinks, and never eat anything with more than eight legs. Will that do?’

She blinked up at him, mouth half-open in surprise at the thought that he was casually dismissing her. Only then did she spot the corners of his mouth twitch and realise this man of high rank was joking with her just as her mother would.

‘Thank you, sir – I shall endeavour to keep those both in mind,’ she croaked as she got over her surprise. ‘There is, however, one more thing.’

‘More?’ He sighed theatrically, ‘My dear, you are a demanding young woman!’

Kesh bowed her head again, attempting to hide the smile crossing her face. ‘So I have been told, sir.’

‘Did they mean it as a compliment at the time?’

‘I, um, I really don’t think so.’

A twinkle appeared in the man’s eye. ‘More fool them, they’ll learn just like the rest of us had to. Now, what sort of advice were you seeking?’

Kesh’s mind went blank for a moment, thrown by his unexpected manner – more as a result of his position than his age. Old men were just a different sort of fool most of the time, but senior House officials were said to be the greatest sticklers for protocol and status. Kesh was servant caste and used to being treated as such – higher castes would naturally treat her with gentle disdain at best, it was how they had been brought up to act.

‘My mother and I, we run a guest house overlooking the harbour,’ she explained at last. ‘One of our guests has been missing a few days now and there is a debt on his room.’

‘Missing rather than left without paying?’

‘His belongings, a sea-chest and whatever’s inside, are still in the room.’

‘And he is a Moon?’

‘Shadow,’ she clarified. ‘Master Estan Tokene Shadow.’

The official brightened. ‘Well, that makes things easier,’ he said. ‘There are few enough Shadows in the city at any one time. If he is here on official business, he’ll be easy to find in the rolls and if not, well, I suspect the chest will be of more than sufficient value? The Shadows are a funny lot, I’ve found. More than their fair share of wild adventurers from those parts.’

Kesh nodded. ‘Certainly worth more – with whatever possessions are in it, far in excess I would expect.’

The official turned in his seat and attracted the attention of a pale young man in grey clerk's robes. 'Estan Tokene of House Shadow – please check the rolls for any man bearing the Tokene family name? And put it on the register in case we are notified about anything. Ah, Mistress – do you know his caste?'

'Craftsman or Merchant, by his manner – though he looked more like a mercenary.'

The official nodded to his clerk and the youth scampered off. 'Have you informed the Lawbringers that a man is missing?'

'Not yet, I have to cross the island to get home so I came here first.'

'See that you do so,' he said solemnly, picking up his pen and recording the details in an elegant script as he continued. 'Most likely your errant Shadow will turn up with a sore head later today. However, if he does not, my ruling is that a debt is acknowledged in your favour. Barring official business listed on the rolls, if there is no word of him by, ah – we are on the third day of Shield's Ascendancy, so let us say, by star's turn? If there is no word by the first of Pity's Ascendancy, the chest shall be brought here to be assessed and apportioned fairly. Your name, please, young lady?' He raised a finger, remembering she was not of House descent. 'Full name, that is.'

'Kesh Hinar,' she said hesitantly, reminding herself of the proper form to be used outside the Vesis and Darch Harbour Warrant. 'Ah, that is Kesh Hinar Vesis.'

'Home?'

'The Crow's Nest boarding house, the Highstrand in the Harbour Warrant.'

'It is done,' the official said with one final flourish of the pen, inscribing his name at the bottom before setting the paper aside. 'Any more advice I can offer you?'

Kesh gave him a small smile and got to her feet. 'No, thank you, sir. Your efforts are much appreciated.'

The official inclined his head in acknowledgement and signalled for the next person to come forward, while Kesh made her way out into the light of day again. Heading out through the open double doors, she stopped at the top of the steps and looked around. It was rare that she made her way to this part of the city. House Moon's district, the smallest in the Imperial City, was situated on the opposing spur of land from her home, across the broad mouth of the Crescent as it entered the Inner Sea.

As with the rest of the city, the district's architecture was dictated by Moon's homeland, far to the west and one of the most remote parts of the Empire. Traditional turf-roofed houses surrounded the fortress that served as the heart of the district, all sheltered from the coastal gales by jagged granite cliffs running unevenly along the outer shore. Steep, pitch-sealed roofs occupied the rest of the area, coloured pale greens and yellows by the lichens growing there.

Kesh walked down the steps to the cobbled ground below and paused before entering the flow of people. It was a circular junction of five streets, lined by carts selling wares and food fresh from the docks; a hub of humanity all turning about a verdigrised statue to Lady Chance. The Goddess had long hair swept back from her face, one half of which was covered by an expressionless mask, and carried a flail like a walking staff. Recalling the temple creed, Kesh's eyes were drawn to the half-dozen chains that trailed from it – variously tipped by blessings or curses.

The crack of sticks on the cobbled ground dragged her attention from the statue. Kesh watched the people spread almost as one to the edges of the junction as a tall man emerged from the left-hand road. He was dressed in Moon's own colours, a surcoat of white emblazoned with a black crescent, while a small conical hat identified him as a house servant of some noble family. He carried a switch of willow in his hand and struck the ground again with it, a rapid double-crack ringing out around the junction as a pair of covered litters advanced in his wake – each flanked by four armoured soldiers carrying muskets, their skin the same dusty-dark as the official's.

Kesh followed the rest and bowed her head respectfully rather than stare at the passing high-castes, though her eyes lingered on the rear-most litter once it had crossed the junction and the eyes of the guards were elsewhere. In their wake the locals resumed their day as though nothing had happened, but Kesh continued to stare after the small procession until it had turned the corner and passed out of sight.

The sight was common enough in the Imperial City, but Kesh's small corner of it saw few high-castes ever pass by. Those who came to the harbour did so in barges, eschewing the city streets when there were quicker routes for those who could afford them. At last she turned away and was about to push into the streams of people passing when something else caught her eye.

A flicker of movement in a shadow – a blur of white and rusty-red that seemed to drag her eyes directly towards it. She took a step forward and peered into the dim space below a cart selling pungent, spiced squid. Standing there, seemingly as oblivious of the scents of frying food above it as the cart's attendant was of it, Kesh saw a fox. The creature stared straight at her, unblinking and completely still now she was looking at it.

A shiver ran down Kesh's spine as she took a half-step backwards and made the sign of Lord Shield – hands together to form a diamond, fingers pressed against her lips.

'Shield defend me,' she whispered between her fingers, 'Knight guard me.'

The fox didn't move, concerned by neither the invocation of Gods nor a passerby crossing its view to walk around the back of the cart.

The cart's owner continued oblivious, deftly turning strips of squid on a hotplate before scooping them up in one movement and depositing them in a pocket of flatbread for a customer. The shifting footsteps around the cart still failed to distract the fox. It kept its gaze fixed on Kesh and her sense of foreboding increased, tales of fox-demons filling her mind. But then the fox broke the contact, for no reason Kesh could tell. It looked away then back at Kesh, long enough to show her it was not spooked, before darting into a narrow alley unnoticed by anyone but the young woman.

Kesh forced herself to swallow, suddenly aware that her mouth had gone dry. She took a few cautious steps towards the narrow alley, one hand pressing against the fold of her jacket to check her father's knife was still sheathed there. Life on board the merchantman had been difficult at the best of times and she'd been taught to use it on a rope or man with equal skill. What good it would do against a demon she didn't know, but just the presence of the weapon boosted her resolve. A mantra to Lord Shapeshifter on her lips, Kesh advanced towards the alley.

There was nothing there. Blocked a dozen yards down by a wall, there were two closed doors leading off it and the scattered debris found in any alley – but nowhere for a fox to hide.

'Maybe I'm going mad,' Kesh said to herself after a long while of looking.

'Eh?' said the man at the cart, half-turning to check if she was talking to him. 'Going mad?'

He wasn't a local, she could see – neither native to the Imperial City nor a man of House Moon as many in this district were. His skin was far paler than the official's deep dusty-brown, his face wide and features narrow in a way she'd never seen before in the city.

Some minor House, north of Moon's own lands?

The look on his face told Kesh he'd noticed her staring and she lowered her eyes, muttering an apology.

'Don't worry yourself, Mistress,' he said with a laugh. 'Ain't many of us in the city, I'm used to curious looks. I'm a Poisontongue, from the snow-line o' Kettekast – that's why I don't look much like most round here. My ancestors are the natives there, not the invaders who colonised the south.'

'It was still rude of me, I'm sorry.'

He shook his head. 'Better'n going mad,' he pointed out. 'What were you looking for there?'

'I ... I thought I saw a fox.'

'Hah! Round here, during the day?' He shook his head. 'Not likely. Those evil little shadows keep clear of busy streets.'

'I know. That's what surprised me.'

He paused and glanced around him. 'You're serious, aren't you? Bastard things they are, I'd believe anything of 'em. Still remember when we found my cousin out on the snow one morning, miles from the village. The elders said they'd torn his soul out through his eyes – don't you go chasing after foxes, you hear me?'

Kesh nodded. 'Maybe it was nothing; I can't see where it would have gone.'

The trader hefted his cleaver, stained red with spice. 'All the same, you watch out. Keep to the main streets on your way home, case it got your scent. It comes back, I'll split it in two, I promise.'

Reluctantly, she turned away from the empty alley. The fox was gone, she'd get no answers here and there was a day's work to be done when she did make it home.

'First the Palace of Law,' Kesh reminded herself as she left the junction under the trader's watchful gaze, 'then home. Emari better have done her chores today, else she'll wish foxes had got her.'