

MOON'S
ARTIFICE

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The Twilight Herald
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The God Tattoo

MOON'S ARTIFICE

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For Ailsa Rebecca Lloyd-Williams

CHAPTER 1

The prohibition on gunpowder weapons for lower castes has been in force for centuries and is obeyed across the Empire of a Hundred Houses. No such ban on lenses or telescopes exists, yet with our Gods residing in bright constellations in the nearer sky, common sense remains the first obstacle to progress.

From *A History* by Ayel Sorote

For one glorious moment he was flying. Starlight shone wetly on the black slates below – the air around him was still, but charged like a God’s breath before the thunder. On the edges of his vision were faint yellow strands of light that spilled around doors and half-shuttered windows. He stared down as though trying to count the cobbles below the slate-tiled roof. Night’s serene hands cradled him and for that moment he felt the cares of the world slough away as sudden, beautiful clarity washed over him.

Bastard fucking fox.

Irato fell. With shocking speed the awning jumped up to meet him and black lights burst before his eyes. Head and chest smashed into the tiles with a crack that seemed to rip right through his skull. His mind filled with the white noise of pain that momentarily tore him from the world as the air was punched from his lungs.

The divine stars burned a trail through the night as he was yanked around by the force of impact. Then the ground struck him with the heavier thump of meat on the butcher’s block. The delicate tinkle of glass vials chimed around the cobbled street. Irato felt pieces patter as gently as summer rain on his close-cropped hair. A sense of warmth flowed over the black emptiness where his body had once been.

Numbness fleetingly consumed him, sucked him down into the belly of the earth before pain burst hot and jagged to wake him. Unable

to command his limbs, Irato lay helpless and stunned – too dazed to recognise the sensations flowering in his damaged body. His arm lay crookedly beneath his chin, tilting it up to look over the blurry grey cobbles of the street. A pale, indistinct shape wavered directly in front of his eyes. His heart thumped two loud beats before the sight suddenly resolved into sharp focus. It was a shard of glass two inches long and shaped like a stiletto, pirouetting delicately in the groove between cobbles, barely a hand span from his eye.

Irato felt a lurch in his gut as he watched the shard slow and topple, spent of its energy – a message from the Gods now done and delivered. Combat-trained senses kicked in, observing with cold detachment while the man they belonged to stared with drunken incomprehension at the glass.

His moment of respite was short-lived. From the damp cobbles rose a new terror, like a cobra roused to anger. A wisp of greenish-white vapour curled before his eyes, then another and another. A quiver of spectral snakes regarded him with lethal intent and the detached voice of observation inside faltered, diverted by this new, unanticipated happening.

As though in automatic response, his lungs shrieked for air and it took all Irato's strength of will to refuse. His eyes began to water and a single tear slid onto his nose, down to skirt his nostril and pat onto the ground below. A wet presence on his eyebrow followed, sharp pain and the touch of blood that took the place of tears in his right eye. Irato was forced to stare at the vapours with one eye, begging for them to dissipate, but they refused. The snakes watched him patiently, knowing their time would come soon – that they would not be denied their prey.

He tried to move but couldn't fathom the tangle of his numb limbs. His chest began to burn, that particular hot sting of cracked ribs, and below that a more distant, discordant pain. He became aware that one hand was pinned and useless beneath his stomach, while the arm under his chin was wrapped in a bright-burning pain.

No choice.

The realisation seemed to clear Irato's thoughts. His body refused to obey, to drag him from the cruel vapours waiting to pounce. His vision started to blur and shiver as the ache for air increased, but instinct was fought to a stalemate by fear. It took the man inside to overrule both, to cast the bones and accept the fate they determined.

There's a chance. I still have time.

He made one last effort to roll himself over, but neither arms nor legs could shift his limp frame and reluctantly he took a long, shuddering breath. The air burned hot and cold in his lungs as the vapour snakes struck, filling him with ecstatic horror as a cacophony of hurts resonated through his body. At last his limbs started to obey. Irato flopped onto his back, face screwed up at the light of the Gods above – the Order of Knight's piercing glare momentarily pinning him to the cobbles like a doomed moth.

Irato winced and stared at the constellation above, far brighter than the lesser stars of the further night sky. There were four in a diamond shape around a fifth; Shield, Knight's ever-steady protector. He paused to blink away the dark ethereal shapes that danced before his eyes and realised coils of cloud covered three constellations in the Order of Knight. What remained were Shield, the twin pistols of Lord Knight and the scales of Lawbringer.

A cold-hearted divination, that one, he thought drunkenly, Lady Pity hides her eyes and the bastards in her Order come out to play. Not the omen I'd like right now.

He struggled to his feet, trying to cradle a damaged arm with one that hurt only marginally less. He stood low, hunched over and knees bent while he tried to outlast a bout of dizziness. He was a heavily-built man, of average height but appearing larger because of his broad limbs and a startling speed of movement. Right now he felt feeble and insubstantial, all that speed turned to sluggish inertia.

The clink of glass fragments sounded inordinately loud in the deserted night-time street as they cascaded off his body. Irato blinked around at the buildings surrounding him; by the decorations he could tell he was not yet out of House Dragon's district of the Imperial City. The last drips of the night's rain fell from gutter heads shaped like that nation's ubiquitous emblem. If he had made it to the Harbour Warrant they would be curved crests of waves instead – symbols of the Vesis and Darch merchant house who held the Imperial warrant for that district, rather than the noble House Dragon, but he had fallen short of his goal.

He shuffled forward a few steps to test his balance, feebly brushing the last of the broken glass from his body and glad his leather armour had at least protected him from that. A fragment of memory came back to him; his coat snagging and tearing open, the glass vials spilling

out like bloodless guts. He hissed in pain and tried to make sense of his memories.

Did something hit me? Was it the fox-spirits? Did Shield himself reach down from the heavens?

Irato took another few steps until he was in the shadows of the building ahead, out of Shield's starlight. He had never seen a God descend from the heavens – they rarely noticed the actions of one man and interfered even more rarely – but the fox-spirits had flooded the rooftops with silent signals and daemon-song that even now echoed through Irato's mind. If Shield had been looking down at the Imperial City, the Ascendant God would have surely heard their fury and hatred.

The ambush was most likely a ploy – they were unlikely to kill him themselves, Irato knew. But they were sly little bastards, these foxes; they'd happily attract the attention of something he couldn't handle quite so easily. Some demon of the night, God or Astaren warrior-mage could have heard the clamour resonating out through an unhearing city and come to investigate.

I have to get off the street, he realised. Whether or not something had been called by the foxes, he didn't want to find out. And of course, given what he'd just inhaled, time was running out anyway.

Scouting desperately around, Irato at last spied a glimmer of hope in the form of lines of light around the shuttered window of a teahouse. It was late in the night and anyone there was surely smoking opium or balese. Irato didn't give a damn which it proved to be – both would numb the pain of his injuries and he had more than a few streets to travel in a short time. If he passed out, or more than an hour elapsed, it would be all over.

That's not going to happen, Irato told himself. *There's a cure, I still have time.*

He remembered his mentor's voice describing just what would take place, accompanied as always by the scents of aniseed and honey that had been ever-present in the man's study. The old doctor had been an exacting master, but scrupulously fair to each of his protégés. Irato found himself drifting into the warmth of fond memories before he caught himself.

Knowing how much it would hurt, Irato shook his head as hard as he could to clear his thoughts.

Wake up, you bastard. You let yourself drift off again, it's all over.

He headed for the teahouse, reaching behind his back with his right hand to try and free one of his hatchets. A band of pain clamped around his stiffening wrist; not broken, he guessed, but it wouldn't be much use and he gave up the effort to unhook it. His heart drummed a fearful tattoo in his chest as he reached the window. He was an easy target to anything that found him out there. Even a common thief was a danger now. Normally, Irato wouldn't break a sweat if attacked, the Blessings imbued by his mentor's spells had seen to that, but this wasn't a normal evening.

A dull pain was building in his head, his thoughts clouded by dizziness from his fall. It felt like his skull was cracked and the numbing chill of night was slowly seeping into his head. Any sort of blow or stumble could see him collapse and once down he knew he wouldn't be getting up. Even if something did, it wouldn't be him any more; of that, his mentor had been chillingly clear.

With skin darker than most natives of the Imperial City, jet-black hair and hooded eyes, few guessed his heritage correctly and Irato had lied about it so often even he found the truth rang false when spoken. A chill ran through him as he imagined that truth being lost to him.

He reached the window and listened a while, trying to peer through the cracks but able to see nothing of the inside. Wincing, Irato drew a knife with painful care and listened again, hoping to catch any small sound that might tell him if the room was empty or its occupants were still conscious. A tiny noise came from somewhere on the other side, perhaps a floorboard as someone shifted their weight slightly. Irato began to ease backwards and raise his knife.

He never even saw the shutter move. Light exploded across his eyes as it struck his head and smashed him backwards. The ground disappeared from behind him and the light faded to nothing as he fell. Blackness enveloped him and went on for ever.

Investigator Narin leaned cautiously out of the window, stave at the ready. There was a big man wearing black crumpled on the ground outside, a long-knife visible at his side.

'Who is it?' Lady Kine whispered from behind him.

Narin raised a cautioning hand and she fell silent while he checked left and right down the street. It was empty, but the starlight illuminated a glittering trail of glass fragments and some fallen slates further down

the road. He returned his attention to the supine man. He appeared unconscious and Narin didn't doubt it was true. He'd kicked the shutter open as hard as he could and, from the cut to the man's forehead, had caught him square on.

Narin peered closer. There were several scrapes on his forehead, one of which had bled down to his chin. He turned and motioned to Kine that she should stay silent. The dark-skinned woman nodded, lips pursed and hands pressed protectively to her belly. The green kohl around her eyes had smeared and he'd knocked one of the white combs in her hair loose so a trail of dark hair hung down to her shoulder. The ache in his heart intensified; a bitter-sweet mix of joy, fear and longing, but a cool breath of wind from the street returned Narin's thoughts to the man he'd injured.

He wore black leather armour underneath a ragged grey cloak. More glass remained on the man's chest; there were lines scored in his armour and tears in the cloak, while his left arm lay at an awkward angle. Narin grimaced. In his fear, he'd lashed out – thinking someone was spying on them – but this man could just as easily have been looking for help.

He picked his way over the window sill, stave still ready to deflect any attack, and looked toward the fallen tiles. He couldn't hear anyone coming to investigate yet, but it was crucial Kine was not seen with him.

A small sound came from inside the teahouse. He turned and saw Kine beckoning frantically so he hopped back through the window and returned to her.

'What's happening?' Kine whispered in a pleading voice. As she spoke she tugged the ivory cinch of her cord belt tight. Having also realised the danger, Kine had wasted no time in pulling on her long coat, ready to leave. Sinuous wyverns were embroidered in blue down the left-hand side, the sign of her House.

'I'm not sure.' He glanced back towards the unconscious man. 'I think he's a thief, or a goshe maybe.'

'Goshe? You think he's an assassin?'

Narin took hold of her arms and brought the small woman close to his face. 'Don't worry; no one's going to hurt you.'

'What if *he* knows?' she insisted, eyes wide with terror. Against her dark skin the whites of her eyes were even more startling, her fear even more pronounced. 'What if he's sent someone to kill us?'

‘Then they’ve lost the element of surprise,’ Narin said calmly, ‘and have backed off. Otherwise they’d be in the room by now. I think he was just crossing the streets by rooftop and fell – he’s nothing to do with us. All that talk about the goshe being assassins is only rumour; the Lawbringers have found no evidence of anything like that. And anyway, your husband wouldn’t be hiring an assassin – that would mean trusting low-caste outsiders when he’s got loyal men in his own household.’

Kine opened her mouth to argue, but couldn’t seem to find the words so he ran a reverential finger down the side of her ebony cheek, catching the errant trail of hair in his fingers and tucking it behind her ear.

‘You need to go,’ Narin urged, kissing her full on the lips and walking her towards the door. ‘Go out the south door, cut down the alley and onto Wyvern’s Walk. I’ll head out into the street and attract the attention of anyone watching.’

‘You’re going to make yourself a target?’

He forced a smile for her and gestured at his pale grey jacket and trousers. The badge on his breast was the only adornment, but it spoke volumes to every citizen of the Empire; an upright spear before a yellow sun casting two rays down to the ground. The sun was the Emperor’s own symbol; coupled with a spear it showed him to be an Investigator of the Lawbringers, the body which technically ruled the streets of the Imperial City.

‘There’s a man injured in the street – injured by my actions. I have to see to him, but I’m an Investigator of the Imperial House so I’m hiding in plain sight.’

He opened the door for her and hugged her tight. ‘Please, Kine, go now. I’ll write to you soon.’ He hesitated and kissed her again, one hand reverentially brushing her belly. ‘I ... I don’t have the words for ... but I love you. I’m sorry it’s happened this way and ...’

The words dried in his throat and he found himself just gaping at Kine, breathing the sweet faint scent of her perfume and feeling her tremble under his hands.

‘I know,’ she said in a small voice, ‘it’s a shock. I’ve put us both in danger with my carelessness.’

He wrapped his arms around her, this time his smile entirely genuine. ‘We were both careless,’ he breathed, lips brushing hers, ‘and still I couldn’t be happier.’

‘What if he finds out? He will find out, he must! I cannot get rid of it; I’d rather die myself than kill our baby.’ There was a sudden fire in her eyes that made Narin hold her even tighter.

‘That won’t happen,’ he said firmly, ‘I need time to think of a plan, but I’d never ask that. I couldn’t ...’ He shook his head. ‘We must have a few weeks before he finds out you’re pregnant, no? So we have a while.’ He released her reluctantly. ‘Now go. I will see you soon, my love, I promise.’

Kine nodded, biting back the tears that threatened and kissing his hand once before she fled. He shut the door behind her and extinguished the lamps before heading back to the window. The man was still unconscious, so Narin stepped over the sill and closed the shutters behind him. He crouched to check the man for a pulse, suddenly afraid he had killed him with the solid wooden shutter.

‘Thank Pity,’ he breathed when at last he felt one, slow but regular.

Narin glanced up at the stars. He wasn’t much for religion, but right now he was more than willing to bow his head, two fingers touched to his forehead, towards the occluded constellation of the Ascendant Goddess, Lady Pity. He cast around at the other stars to get his bearings. Taking a step out from under the eaves of the teahouse to look east, where the nearer Ascendants in the Order of Empress would be visible, it was Lord Thief, not Healer, that he could make out.

Narin looked down at the goshe, trying to think. He had an obligation to help the man no matter what the circumstances, of that he was very aware. His father had been a merchant’s clerk and a timid man, but he’d revered the Lawbringers and Narin had grown up with the oaths hanging on the wall of their home. Long before his parents had died and he’d become a novice to the Palace of Law, Narin had been able to recite them by heart.

‘Thief, eh? Maybe that’s a better Ascendant to be looking down on this goshe anyway,’ he muttered.

‘In that, you are correct,’ called a deep voice from a way down the street.

Narin yelped and whirled around. His hands moved automatically, bringing his stave up to the guard position before he even saw the threat. The Investigator hesitated as no attack came. All he could see was a bearded man ten yards off, but one who’d appeared silently and now stood in the middle of the street watching him.

‘Who are you?’ Narin demanded, moving away from the injured man to give himself space if an attack came. The tip of the staff he kept in line with the stranger’s face, but it was the dark corners of the street he was more concerned with.

‘I have many names,’ the stranger said, not moving. ‘I think you’ll be able to guess one at least.’

Narin stopped and gave the man his full attention. He was big, extremely big in fact – a few inches taller than Narin but vastly broader. His face was tanned and weathered; darker than a local’s, with a long neat beard of black curls that suggested southern origin, House Redearth or somewhere within its hegemony of lesser House-states. The man had long hair drawn back like a nobleman’s and the cut of his white clothes suggested warrior caste, but he wore no sword or pistol – nor was there a badge of House visible on his clothes. Instead, there was only a black spiral embroidered on the left-hand side of his coat, studded with glinting crystals, the pattern continuing seamlessly down an ornate silver vambrace on his arm.

Narin blinked and looked again at the vambrace. Suddenly the staff felt like lead in his hands. Unable to help himself he glanced up at the constellation directly above.

‘Do not worry, the stars still shine without me,’ the Ascendant God standing before him said in a level tone. ‘You have more pressing concerns right now.’

‘I ... ah ... Lord Shield?’

The God inclined his head. ‘Investigator.’

‘But ... why ... ?’ Narin stopped and turned back to the unconscious man with dread slithering down his spine. ‘Ah, who is ... ? Oh Empress, have mercy!’

‘Investigator,’ Shield said sternly, ‘don’t be so foolish. My Brother-under-Knight would be most displeased in his servant.’

Narin turned cautiously around. The street remained dark and empty. ‘Is ... ah, is Lord Lawbringer here too?’

‘No, nor any other. That is a man at your feet, just a man.’ Shield took a step forward, head slightly tilted to one side as though listening to a voice on the wind. ‘You have inconvenienced me, Investigator.’

‘What? Ah, I mean, I’m sorry, Lord Shield.’ Narin gaped for a moment, then checked himself and dropped to one knee. ‘I did not realise.’

‘Clearly.’

Head bowed, Narin waited. The cool night air prickled on his exposed neck and he started to feel terribly vulnerable. Just as he was about to ask what he’d done, Shield made up the ground between them in the blink of an eye. Gasping, Narin fell back, barely keeping a grip on his stave as he scrambled to recover himself.

‘That man was a thief, I believe,’ Shield said distantly, eyes fixed on the black-clad goshe.

Another blurring movement brought him to the man’s side and he knelt, touching one finger to the man’s injured temple and a second over a closed eye. The God bowed his head in concentration and Narin saw pale light glow from his half-shut eyes. It lasted just a few moments then Shield withdrew his hand and straightened, giving Narin an appraising look.

‘A thief of what, however, I do not know,’ Shield continued eventually. ‘I had hoped the rat would return to its lair to lick its wounds, but then you got in the way, Investigator.’

‘You threw him from the roof?’ Narin asked in astonishment. It had to be a miracle the man was even alive after such a fall – that he would be able to walk home even less likely.

Shield tilted his head to look at the damaged roof. ‘He is hardier than he appears,’ the God said by way of reply. ‘Unfortunately, only in body.’

‘But he’s alive; you can still question him when he wakes!’

Lord Shield gave him a look that froze him to the spot. ‘Your intervention has precluded that.’

‘You can’t heal his injuries?’

The God turned to the goshe. He reached out again and brushed his fingers over the man’s head injury, then tapped twice against his chest. ‘Some. Not everything can be undone.’

He stood and gazed down at Narin, who had recovered himself and knelt again. Shield’s stare was unblinking. Narin flinched under the intense scrutiny, though there was no anger in that look. If the God felt any emotion, he betrayed nothing.

‘This is a problem for you, Investigator,’ Shield added gravely.

Narin’s guts went cold. ‘My ... my apologies, Lord Shield, I thought he was spying on me.’

‘Why would he spy on you?’

‘I, ah, I do not know.’

A massive hand reached down and took hold of Narin's tunic. Shield lifted him to his feet with no appreciable effort, his expression grave. 'I choose to forget you lied to me there. Try again.'

Narin gaped – his mind blank until a tiny light flickered in the recesses of Shield's eyes and startled him into life again. 'I'm sorry, Lord – I meant only to protect another.'

'I can keep a secret, unless you think to protect them from me?'

'No! No, of course not. I was meeting someone; she ah, she gave me some news.'

Shield bared his teeth in what Narin hoped was a grin. 'Husband found out?'

The Investigator's heart gave a lurch. For the hundredth time he wanted to rap his knuckles against his forehead.

What sort of a fool falls in love with a noblewoman? A married noblewoman? A married noblewoman of House Wyvern, second only to its cousin House Dragon in its obsession with honour?

'Close enough. How did you ... ?' he asked weakly.

'I still remember mortal life.'

Narin lowered his eyes. Lord Shield, carried dying into the heavens by his lord, the Ascendant God Knight, to serve him there as he had in life.

'Of course, I'm sorry. Ah, why have I inconvenienced you, Lord Shield? Surely he will wake still?'

'He will wake.'

'Can't you interrogate him then? He won't be able to lie to you either.'

Again the distant light flashed, white-green in the blackness of the Ascendant God's pupils, and Narin felt it like tiny claws brushing his mind. He winced at the sensation and Shield released him. Narin sagged with relief and staggered back a step before catching his balance.

'It would be of no use,' Shield said slowly. 'Tell me, Investigator, your oaths – you have a duty to any you harm or place in danger, no?'

Narin's mouth fell open as the memory of his father's stitched wall-hanging appeared in his memory. The words were etched into his heart; the first he'd learned to read, long before Narin could fully understand what they stood for.

'I – yes.'

'Then you bear a duty to this man and a debt to me for your interference.' Shield gestured to the goshe on the ground. 'You will make amends.'

'How?' Narin asked in a hoarse whisper.

‘You will investigate,’ Shield said simply. ‘This man carries secrets with him, secrets he cannot now tell. You will find them out or you will die in the attempt, do you understand me?’

Narin found himself unable to speak. Only a tiny wheeze escaped his throat. The moments ticked by, the crisp salty air caressed his cheek and still he did not reply. With an effort he managed to nod, realising his hands were shaking as he did so.

‘Good. Once you know this man’s secrets, you will answer me this – who is the moon?’

Narin blinked. ‘Who ... ?’

The words died in his throat as Shield vanished from sight. Narin reeled as though struck around the head, black stars bursting before his eyes. The night seemed to have twisted and snapped like a hungry creature, enveloping the Ascendant God and leaving no sign he had even been there before.

A voice echoed down the empty street. He didn’t hear the words, but it stirred him into action all the same. An Investigator of the Imperial House he might be, but Narin still didn’t want to have to answer any questions about why he was out here all alone with an injured goshe.

‘Who is the moon? What in Lady Pity’s name does that mean?’ Narin muttered in disbelief. ‘What have I got myself into?’

He looked around at the dark, still streets. The faint scent of wood smoke mingled with the ever-present salty tang of the sea. The breeze was light, brushing unhurried across his cheek. He stared at the empty cobbled ground where Lord Shield had stood and tried to work out what had happened. Foreboding was a cold weight in his gut, despite the mild night air.

The city seemed to stop around him, silent and harmonious while he alone struggled. For a man used to solitude, Narin suddenly felt more alone than ever before. The weight of all he’d learned tonight pressed down as though the light of the stars themselves had him snared in a web. Narin bowed his head and closed his eyes briefly. Kine’s smiling face came easily into his mind; her dark skin fading into the shadows, her beauty like a fire’s warmth against his skin.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the unconscious man. The goshe was dark-haired and tanned of skin, with scars on his face and faint stubble on his cheeks. What House he belonged to, Narin couldn’t tell. The Imperial City included districts ruled by each of the ten Great

Houses – once just extended noble families, now synonymous with the nations they ruled. Public thoroughfares under the rule of the Lawbringers cut through each district, but beyond those the Emperor’s law was always in competition with the Great House who claimed sovereignty there.

‘You’re obviously not House Dragon or any House under it,’ Narin said to the goshe, ‘but looking at you I can’t fit your heritage to any House I know.’

The Imperial City had spent five hundred years under the stewardship of House Dragon, a hegemony that ruled its own nation and those of the lesser Houses under it. Thickset, black-skinned Dragons were a common sight on these streets, as were their lesser cousins, House Wyvern, to which Kine belonged. The other states within Dragon’s domain maintained less of a presence in the Imperial City, but Narin had seen enough of each to at least know a Darkcloud citizen from a Smoke. Beyond that, there were so many shades and tints of skin and eyes in the city that most were as impossible to discern as the dark Dragons or near-albino Leviathans were obvious.

‘So what do I do now?’ he asked the man at his feet. Narin shook his head in disbelief and almost smiled. ‘I’ve no idea – what would Lawbringer Rhe do? What would Enchei do?’

That last thought seemed to trigger something inside him and he stirred into action. ‘Enchei’d just deal with it as though nothing strange had happened,’ he said with a sigh as he knelt and hauled the goshe into a seating position.

‘Come to think of it, this is all the old man’s fault anyway.’ He ducked his head under the goshe’s arm and manoeuvred him until he was draped over his back.

‘All Enchei’s fault,’ Narin repeated as he tried to stand. ‘Stars in heaven you’re heavy!’ he gasped, wavering and almost dropping back down to the ground.

The goshe was a dead weight on his shoulders, all hard muscle and bone. Crab-like, Narin hauled the man over to the window sill and grabbed hold of it to drag himself up. For a moment his knees wavered before he at last straightened them with a gasp.

‘Damn you, Enchei,’ he continued through gritted teeth. ‘If I’d never met you I’d not be in love with another man’s wife. Not be dragging this Gods-cursed lump home for reasons that’ll probably get me killed – if my friend doesn’t find out about me and his wife first.’

The layout of the city unfolded in his mind, a broken wheel of streets and districts that followed the curve of the Crescent River around the Imperial Island. Narin's home was on the near-side of the island, between the Tier Bridge and the vast Imperial Palace, but he would have to cross a lot of ground to get there.

'The Harbour Warrant,' Narin said to the weight on his shoulder, 'That's just a few streets away. I'll take you there and find a patrol to help me. Lord Shield, if you're looking down, steer me clear of House Dragon's soldiers or I'll never get him out.'

He started off across the street, staggering to the nearest alley to be swallowed up by the shadows there. Something pattered down onto his feet as he went. He looked down and saw the sparkle of glass fragments glint in the starlight.

'Who is the moon?' he repeated under his breath. 'What sort of a question is that?'

Under the glare of Shield's starlight he didn't dare voice his thoughts entirely out loud. The God might still be watching him, might even be listening to anything he said.

The High Gods and their Ascendants had not figured largely in Narin's life. There were traditions and rituals he knew as well as most in the Empire of a Hundred Houses, but the Lawbringers were the religion his father had taught him; the ideals they stood for and the order they had brought.

'When has the moon been anyone?' he wondered as he turned a corner and shifted the goshie to a more comfortable position. 'The moon's a lump in the sky where no God lives, and a Great House far to the west. Moon's water is a drink I could do with a few of right now, but it's no man or woman I ever heard of.'

The night seemed to grow colder, his breath casting clouds of vapour before him as the effort of carrying the man increased with every step.

'I'm dead then,' Narin muttered miserably. 'Dead and buried one way or the other.'

Scowling, he shook his head and plodded on, trying to focus on his anger rather than the strain on his back.

'I'll be dead,' he continued to the uncaring night, 'and Enchei won't have a friend in the world again. That might shut the bastard up for a while at least. Should've thought of it sooner really.'