

Prologue: A Strained Conversation

Locke Lamora stood on the pier in Tal Verrar with the hot wind of a burning ship at his back and the cold bite of a loaded crossbow's bolt at his neck.

He grinned and concentrated on holding his own crossbow level with the left eye of his opponent; they were close enough that they would catch most of one another's blood, should they both twitch their fingers at the same time.

'Be reasonable,' said the man facing him. Beads of sweat left visible trails as they slid down his grime-covered cheeks and forehead. 'Consider the disadvantages of your situation.'

Locke snorted. 'Unless your eyeballs are made of iron, the disadvantage is mutual. Wouldn't you say so, Jean?'

They were standing two-by-two on the pier, Locke beside Jean, their assailants beside one another. Jean and his foe were toe-to-toe with their crossbows similarly poised; four cold metal bolts were cranked and ready scant inches away from the heads of four understandably nervous men. Not one of them could miss at this range, not if all the gods above or below the heavens willed it otherwise.

'All four of us would appear to be up to our balls in quicksand,' said Jean.

On the water behind them, the old galleon groaned and creaked as the roaring flames consumed it from the inside out. Night was made day for hundreds of yards around; the hull was crisscrossed with the white-orange lines of seams coming apart. Smoke boiled out of those hellish cracks in little black eruptions, the last shuddering

breaths of a vast wooden beast dying in agony. The four men stood on their pier, strangely alone in the midst of light and noise that were drawing the attention of the entire city.

‘Lower your piece, for the love of the gods,’ said Locke’s opponent. ‘We’ve been instructed not to kill you if we don’t have to.’

‘And I’m sure you’d be honest if it were otherwise, of course,’ said Locke. His smile grew. ‘I make it a point never to trust men with weapons at my windpipe. Sorry.’

‘Your hand will start to shake long before mine does.’

‘I’ll rest the tip of my quarrel against your nose when I get tired. Who sent you after us? What are they paying you? We’re not without funds; a happy arrangement could be reached.’

‘Actually,’ said Jean, ‘I know who sent them.’

‘Really?’ Locke flicked a glance at Jean before locking eyes with his adversary once again.

‘And an arrangement has been reached, but I wouldn’t call it happy.’

‘Ah . . . Jean, I’m afraid you’ve lost me.’

‘No.’ Jean raised one hand, palm out, to the man opposite him. He then slowly, carefully shifted his aim to his left until his crossbow was pointing at Locke’s head. The man he’d previously been threatening blinked in surprise. ‘You’ve lost *me*, Locke.’

‘Jean,’ said Locke, the grin vanishing from his face, ‘this isn’t funny.’

‘I agree. Hand your piece over to me.’

‘Jean—’

‘Hand it over now. Smartly. You there, are you some kind of moron? Get that thing out of my face and point it at him.’

Jean’s former opponent licked his lips nervously, but didn’t move. Jean ground his teeth together. ‘Look, you sponge-witted dock ape, I’m doing your job for you. Point your crossbow at my gods-damned partner so we can get off this pier!’

‘Jean, I would describe this turn of events as *less than helpful*,’ said Locke, and he looked as though he might say more, except that Jean’s opponent chose that moment to take Jean’s advice.

It felt to Locke as if sweat was now cascading down his face, as though his own treacherous moisture was abandoning the premises before anything worse happened.

‘There. Three on one.’ Jean spat on the pier. ‘You gave me no choice but to cut a deal with the employer of these gentlemen before we set out – gods damn it, *you* forced *me*. I’m sorry. I thought they’d make contact before they drew down on us. Now give your weapon over.’

‘Jean, what the *hell* do you think you’re—’

‘Don’t. *Don’t* say another fucking thing. Don’t try to finesse me; I know you too well to let you have your say. Silence, Locke. Finger off the trigger and *hand it over*.’

Locke stared at the steel-tipped point of Jean’s quarrel, his mouth open in disbelief. The world around him faded to that tiny, gleaming point, alive with the orange reflection of the inferno blazing in the anchorage behind him.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Locke. ‘I just—“

‘This is the last time I’m going to say this, Locke.’ Jean ground his teeth together and held his aim steady, directly between Locke’s eyes. ‘Take your finger off the trigger and hand over your gods-damned weapon. *Right now.*’

Book I

CARDS IN THE HAND

**‘If you must play, decide upon three things at the start:
the rules of the game, the stakes, and the quitting time.’**

Chinese Proverb

CHAPTER ONE

LITTLE GAMES

1

The game was Carousel Hazard, the stakes were roughly half of all the wealth they commanded in the entire world, and the plain truth was that Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen were begetting beaten like a pair of dusty carpets.

‘Last offering for the fifth hand,’ said the velvet-coated attendant from his podium on one side of the circular table. ‘Do the gentlemen choose to receive new cards?’

‘No, no – the gentlemen choose to confer,’ said Locke, leaning to his left to place his mouth close to Jean’s ear. He lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘What’s your hand look like?’

‘A parched desert,’ Jean murmured, casually moving his right hand up to cover his mouth. ‘How’s yours?’

‘A wasteland of bitter frustration.’

‘Shit.’

‘Have we been neglecting our prayers this week? Did one of us fart in a temple or something?’

‘I thought the expectation of losing was all part of the plan.’

‘It is. I just expected we’d be able to put up a better fight than *this*.’

The attendant coughed demurely into his left hand, the card-table equivalent of slapping Locke and Jean across the backs of their heads. Locke leaned away from Jean, tapped his cards lightly against the lacquered surface of the table and grinned the best knew-what-he-was-doing sort of grin he could conjure from his facial arsenal. He sighed inwardly, glancing at the sizeable pile of wooden markers that was about to make the short journey from the centre of the table to his opponents’ stacks.

‘We are of course prepared,’ he said, ‘to meet our fate with heroic stoicism, worthy of mention by historians and poets.’

The dealer nodded. ‘Ladies and gentlemen both decline last offering. House calls for final hands.’

There was a flurry of shuffling and discarding as the four players formed their final hands and set them, face down, on the table before them.

‘Very well,’ said the attendant. ‘Turn and reveal.’

The sixty or seventy of Tal Verrar’s wealthiest idlers who had crowded the room behind them to watch every turn of Locke and Jean’s unfolding humiliation now leaned forward as one, eager to see how embarrassed they would be this time.

Tal Verrar, the Rose of the Gods, at the westernmost edge of what the Therin people call the civilized world.

If you could stand in thin air a thousand yards above Tal Verrar's tallest towers, or float in lazy circles there like the nations of gulls that infest the city's crevices and rooftops, you would see how its vast, dark islands have given this place its ancient nickname. They whirl outward from the city's heart, a series of crescents steadily increasing in size, like the stylized petals of a rose in an artist's mosaic.

They are not natural, in the sense that the mainland looming a few miles to the north-east is natural. The mainland cracks before wind and weather, showing its age. The islands of Tal Verrar are unweathered, possibly unweatherable – they are formed from the black glass of the Eldren, unimaginable quantities of it, endlessly tiered and shot through with passages, glazed with layers of stone and dirt from which a city of men and women springs.

This Rose of the Gods is surrounded by an artificial reef, a broken circle three miles in diameter, shadows under shadowed waves. Against this hidden wall the restless Sea of Brass is gentled for the passage of vessels flying the banners of a hundred kingdoms and dominions. Their masts and yards rise in a forest, white with furled sails, far beneath your feet.

If you could turn your eye to the city's western island, you would see that its interior surfaces are sheer black walls, plunging hundreds of feet to the softly lapping harbour waves, where a network of wooden docks clings to the base of the cliffs. The seaward side of the island, however, is tiered along its entire length. Six wide, flat ledges sit one atop the other with smooth fifty-foot escarpments backing all but the highest.

The southernmost district of this island is called the Golden Steps – its six levels are thick with alehouses, dicing dens, private clubs, brothels and fighting pits. The Golden Steps are heralded as the gambling capital of the Therin city-states, a place where men and women may lose money on anything from the mildest vices to the wickedest felonies. The authorities of Tal Verrar, in a magnanimous gesture of hospitality, have decreed that no foreigner upon the Golden Steps may be impressed into slavery. As a result, there are few places west of Camorr where it is safer for strangers to drink their brains out and fall asleep in the gutters and gardens.

There is rigid stratification on the Golden Steps; with each successively higher tier, the quality of the establishments increases, as do the size, number and vehemence of the guards at the doors. Crowning the Golden Steps are a dozen baroque mansions of old stone and witchwood, embedded in the wet, green luxury of manicured gardens and miniature forests.

These are the ‘chance-houses of quality’ – exclusive clubs where men and women of funds may gamble in the style to which their letters of credit entitle them. These houses have been informal centres of power for centuries, where nobles, bureaucrats, merchants, ships’ captains, legates and spies gather to wager fortunes, both personal and political.

Every possible amenity is contained within these houses. Notable visitors board carriage-boxes at exclusive docks at the base of the inner harbour cliffs and are hauled up by gleaming brass water engines, thereby avoiding the narrow, twisting, crowd-choked ramps leading up the five lower Steps on their seaward face. There is even a public duelling green – a broad expanse of well-kept grass lying dead-centre on the top tier, so

that cooler heads need not be given any chance to prevail when someone has their blood up.

The houses of quality are sacrosanct. Custom older and firmer than law forbids soldiers or constables to set foot within them, save for response to the most heinous crimes. They are the envy of a continent: no foreign club, however luxurious or exclusive, can quite recapture the particular atmosphere of a genuine Verrari chance-house. And they are, one and all, put to shame by the Sinspire.

Nearly one hundred and fifty feet tall, the Sinspire juts skyward at the southern end of the topmost tier of the Steps, which is itself more than two hundred and fifty feet above the harbour. The Sinspire is an Elderglass tower, glimmering with a pearly black sheen. A wide balcony decked with alchemical lanterns circles each of its nine levels. At night, the Sinspire is a constellation of lights in scarlet and twilight-sky blue, the heraldic colours of Tal Verrar.

The Sinspire is the most exclusive, most notorious and most heavily guarded chance-house in the world, open from sunset to sunrise for those powerful, wealthy or beautiful enough to make it past the whims of the doorkeepers. Each ascending floor outdoes the one beneath it for luxury, exclusivity and the risk ceiling of the games allowed. Access to each higher floor must be earned with good credit, amusing behaviour and impeccable play. Some aspirants spend years of their lives and thousands of solari trying to catch the attention of the Sinspire's master, whose ruthless hold on his unique position has made him the most powerful arbiter of social favour in the city's history.

The code of conduct at the Sinspire is unwritten, but as rigid as that of a religious cult. Most simply, most incontrovertibly, it is death to be caught cheating here. Were the

Archon of Tal Verrar himself to be detected with a card up his sleeve, he would find no appeal this side of the gods themselves from the consequences. Every few months, the tower's attendants discover some would-be exception to the rule, and yet another person dies quietly of an alchemical overdose in their carriage, or tragically 'slips' from the balcony nine storeys above the hard, flat stones of the Sinspire's courtyard.

It has taken Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen two years and a completely new set of false identities to carefully cheat their way up to the fifth floor.

They are, in fact, cheating at this very moment, trying hard to keep up with opponents who have no need to do likewise.

3

'Ladies show a run of Spires and a run of Sabres, crowned with the Sigil of the Sun,' said the attendant. 'Gentlemen show a run of Chalices and a mixed hand, crowned with the five of Chalices. Fifth hand is to the ladies.'

Locke bit the inside of his cheek as a wave of applause rippled through the warm air of the room. The ladies had taken four of the five hands so far, and the crowd had barely deigned to notice Locke and Jean's sole victory.

'Well, damn,' said Jean, in credible mock surprise.

Locke turned to the opponent on his right. Maracosa Durena was a slender, dark-complexioned woman in her late thirties, with thick hair the colour of oil smoke and several visible scars on her neck and forearms. In her right hand she held a thin, black

cigar wrapped with gold thread, and on her face she wore a tight smile of detached contentment. The game was clearly not demanding her utmost exertion.

The attendant flicked Locke and Jean's little pile of lost wooden counters toward the ladies' side of the table with a long-handled crop. He then used the same crop to sweep all the cards back into his hands; it was strictly forbidden for players to touch the cards after the attendant had called for the reveal.

'Well, Madam Durenna,' said Locke, 'my congratulations on the increasingly robust state of your finances. Your purse would appear to be the only thing growing faster than my impending hangover.' Locke knuckle-walked one of his markers over the fingers of his right hand. The little wooden disc was worth five solari, roughly eight months' pay for a common labourer.

'My condolences on a particularly unfortunate run of cards, Master Kosta.' Madam Durenna took a long drag from her cigar, then slowly exhaled a stream of smoke so that it hung in the air between Locke and Jean, just far enough away to avoid direct insult. Locke had come to recognize that she used the cigar smoke as her *strat péti*, her 'little game' – an ostensibly civilized mannerism actually cultivated to distract or annoy opponents at a gaming table and goad them into making mistakes. Jean had planned to use his own cigars for the same purpose, but Durenna's aim was better.

'No run of cards could be considered truly unfortunate in the presence of such a lovely pair of opponents,' said Locke.

'I could almost admire a man who can stay so charmingly dishonest while being bled of all his silver,' said Durenna's partner, who was seated on Durenna's right, between her and the dealer.

Izmila Corvaleur was nearly of a size with Jean, wide and florid, prodigiously rounded in every place a woman *could* be round. She was undeniably attractive, but the intelligence that shone out of her eyes was sharp and contemptuous. In her, Locke recognized a contained pugnacity akin to that of a street brawler – a honed appetite for hard contests. Corvaleur nibbled constantly from a silver-gilded box of cherries coated in powdered chocolate, sucking her fingers loudly after each one. Her own *strat péti*, of course.

She was purpose-built for Carousel Hazard, thought Locke. A mind for the cards and a frame capable of withstanding the game's unique punishment for losing a hand.

'Default,' said the attendant. Within his podium, he tripped the mechanism that set the carousel spinning. This device, in the centre of the table, was a set of circular brass frames that held row upon row of tiny glass vials, each one capped with silver. It whirled under the soft lantern light of the gaming parlour until it became continuous streaks of silver within brass, and then – a clinking sound of mechanisms beneath the table, the rattle of many tiny vessels of thick glass colliding with one another and the carousel spat out two of its vials. They rolled toward Locke and Jean and clattered against the slightly upraised outer rim of the table.

Carousel Hazard was a game for two teams of two; an *expensive* game, for the clockwork carousel mechanism came very dear. At the end of each hand, the losing team was randomly dispensed two vials from the carousel's great store of little bottles; these held liquor, mixed with sweet oils and fruit juice to disguise the potency of any given drink. The cards were only one aspect of the game. Players also had to maintain

concentration under the increasing effects of the devilish little vials. The only way a game could end was for a player to become too drunk to keep playing.

Theoretically, the game could not be cheated. The Sinspire maintained the mechanism and prepared the vials; the little silver caps were fastened tight over wax seals. Players were not permitted to touch the carousel, or another player's vials, on pain of immediate default. Even the chocolates and cigars being consumed by the players had to be provided by the house. Locke and Jean could have gone so far as to refuse to allow Madam Corvaleur the luxury of her sweets, but that would have been a bad idea for several reasons.

'Well,' said Jean as he cracked the seal on his tiny libation, 'here's to charming losers, I suppose.'

'If only we knew where to find some,' said Locke, and in unison they tossed back their drinks. Locke's left a warm, plum-flavoured trail down his throat – it was one of the potent ones. He sighed and set the empty vial down before him. Four vials to one, and the way his concentration seemed to be unravelling at the edges meant that he was beginning to feel it.

As the attendant sorted and shuffled the cards for the next hand, Madam Durena took another long, satisfied draw on her cigar and flicked the ashes into a solid-gold pot set on pedestal behind her right hand. She exhaled two lazy streams of smoke through her nose and stared at the carousel from behind a grey veil. Durena was a natural ambush predator, Locke thought, always most comfortable behind some camouflage. His information said that she was only recently arrived in the life of a city-bound merchant speculator. Her previous profession had been the command of bounty-privateers, hunting

and sinking the slaver ships of Jerem on the high seas. She hadn't acquired those scars drinking tea in anyone's parlour.

It would be very, very unfortunate if a woman like her were to realize that Locke and Jean were counting on what Locke liked to call 'discreetly unorthodox methods' to win the game – hell, it would be preferable to simply lose the old-fashioned way, or to be caught cheating by the Sinspire attendants. They, at least, would probably be quick and efficient executioners. They had a very busy establishment to run.

'Hold the cards,' said Madam Corvaleur to the attendant, interrupting Locke's musings. 'Mara, the gentlemen have indeed had several hands of unfortunate luck. Might we not allow them a recess?'

Locke concealed his instant excitement; the pair of Carousel Hazard partners who held the lead could offer their opponents a short break from the game, but the courtesy was rarely extended, for the obvious reason that it allowed the losers precious time to shake the effects of their liquor. Was Corvaleur trying to cover for some distress of her own?

'The gentlemen *have* seen a great deal of strenuous effort on our behalf, counting all those markers and pushing them over to us again and again.' Durena drew smoke, expelled it. 'You would honour us, gentlemen, if you would consent to a short pause to refresh and recover yourselves.'

Ah. Locke smiled and folded his hands on the table before him. So that was the game – play to the crowd and show off how little regard the ladies truly had for their opponents, how inevitable they considered their own victory. This was etiquette fencing,

and Durena had performed the equivalent of a lunge for the throat. Outright refusal would be terrible form; Locke and Jean's parry would have to be delicate.

'How could anything be more refreshing,' said Jean, 'than to continue our game against such an excellent partnership?'

'You're too kind, Master de Ferra,' said Madam Durena. 'But would you have it said that we are heartless? You've refused us neither of our comforts.' She used her cigar to gesture at Madam Corvaleur's sweets. 'Would you refuse us our desire to give a comfort in exchange?'

'We would refuse you nothing, Madam, and yet we would beg leave to answer your *greater* desire, for which you've troubled yourselves to come here tonight – the desire to play.'

'There are many hands yet before us,' added Locke, 'and it would wound Jerome and myself to inconvenience the ladies in any way.' He made eye contact with the dealer as he spoke.

'You have thus far presented no inconvenience,' said Madam Corvaleur sweetly.

Locke was uncomfortably aware that the attention of the crowd was indeed hanging on this exchange. He and Jean had challenged the two women widely regarded as the best Carousel Hazard players in Tal Verrar, and a substantial audience had packed all the other tables on the fifth floor of the Sinspire. Those tables should have been hosting games of their own, but by some unspoken understanding between the house and its patrons, other action in the parlour had ceased for the duration of the slaughter.

'Very well,' said Durena. 'We've no objection to continuing, for our sakes. Perhaps your luck may even turn.'

Locke's relief that she had abandoned her conversational ploy was faint; she did, after all, have every expectation of continuing to thrash money out of him and Jean, like a cook might beat weevils from a bag of flour.

'Sixth hand,' said the attendant. 'Initial wager will be ten solari.' As each player pushed forward two wooden coins, the attendant tossed three cards down in front of them.

Madam Corvaleur finished another chocolate-dusted cherry and sucked the sweet residue from her fingers. Before touching his cards, Jean slid the fingers of his left hand briefly under the lapel of his coat and moved them, as though scratching an itch. After a few seconds, Locke did the same. Locke caught Madam Durena watching them, and saw her roll her eyes. Signals between players were perfectly acceptable, but a bit more subtlety was preferred.

Durena, Locke and Jean peeked at their cards almost simultaneously; Corvaleur was a moment behind them, with her fingers still wet. She laughed quietly. Genuine good fortune or *strat p ti*? Durena looked eminently satisfied, but Locke had no doubt she maintained that precise expression even in her sleep. Jean's face revealed nothing, and Locke for his part tried on a thin smirk, although his three opening cards were pure rubbish.

Across the room, a curving set of brass-railed stairs, with a large attendant guarding their foot, led up toward the sixth floor, briefly expanding into a sort of gallery on the way. A flicker of movement from this gallery caught Locke's attention: half-concealed in shadow was a slight, well-dressed figure. The warm golden light of the

room's lanterns was reflected in a pair of optics, and Locke felt a shivery thrill of excitement along his spine.

Could it be? Locke tried to keep one eye on the shadowy figure while pretending to fixate on his cards. The glare on those optics didn't waver or shift – the man was staring at their table, all right.

At last, he and Jean had attracted (or stumbled into, and by the gods they'd take that bit of luck) the attention of the man who kept his offices on the ninth floor – Master of the Sinspire, clandestine ruler of all Tal Verrar's thieves, a man with an iron grip on the worlds of larceny and luxury both. In Camorr they would have called him *capa*, but here he affected no title save his own name.

Requin.

Locke cleared his throat, turned his eyes back to the table and prepared to lose another hand with grace. Out on the dark water, the soft echo of ships' bells could be heard, ringing the tenth hour of the evening.

'Eighteenth hand,' said the dealer. 'Initial wager will be ten solari.' Locke had to push aside the eleven little vials before him, with a visibly shaking hand, to slide his buy-in forward. Madam Durena, steady as a dry-docked ship, was working on her fourth cigar of the night. Madam Corvaleur seemed to be wavering in her seat; was she perhaps more red-cheeked than usual? Locke tried not to stare too intently as she placed her initial wager; perhaps the waver came solely from his own impending inebriation. It was

nearing midnight, and the smoke-laced air of the stuffy room scratched at Locke's eyes and throat like wool.

The dealer, emotionless and alert as ever – he seemed to have more clockwork in him than the carousel did – flicked three cards to the tabletop before Locke. Locke ran his fingers under his coat lapel, then peeked at his cards and said, 'Ahhhh-ha,' with a tone of interested pleasure. They were an astonishing constellation of crap; his worst hand yet. Locke blinked and squinted, wondering if the alcohol was somehow masking a set of decent cards, but alas – when he concentrated again, they were still worthless.

The ladies had been forced to drink last, but unless Jean concealed a major miracle on the tabletop to Locke's left, it was a good bet that another little vial would soon be rolling merrily across the table toward Locke's wobbling hand.

Eighteen hands, thought Locke, to lose nine hundred and eighty solari thus far. His mind, well lubricated by the Sinspire's liquor, wandered off on its own calculations. A year's worth of fine new clothes for a man of high station. A small ship. A very large house. The complete lifetime earnings of an honest artisan, like a stonemason. Had he ever pretended to be a stonemason?

'First options,' said the dealer, snapping him back to the game.

'Card,' said Jean. The attendant slid one to him; Jean peeked at it, nodded and slid another wooden chit toward the centre of the table. 'Bid up.'

'Hold fast,' said Madam Durena. She moved two wooden chits forward from her substantial pile. 'Partner reveal.' She showed two cards from her hand to Madam Corvaleur, who was unable to contain a smile.

‘Card,’ said Locke. The attendant passed him one, and he turned up an edge just far enough to see what it was. The two of Chalice, worth precisely one wet shit from a sick dog in this situation. He forced himself to smile. ‘Bid up,’ he said, sliding two markers forward. ‘I’m feeling blessed.’

All eyes turned expectantly to Madam Corvaleur, who plucked a chocolate-dusted cherry from her dwindling supply, popped it into her mouth and then rapidly sucked her fingers clean. ‘Oh-ho,’ she said, staring down at her cards and drumming one set of sticky fingers gently on the table. ‘Oh . . . ho . . . oh . . . Mara, this is . . . the oddest . . .’

And then she slumped forward, settling her head onto her large pile of wooden markers on the tabletop. Her cards fluttered down, face-up, and she slapped at them, without coordination, trying to cover them up.

‘Izmila,’ said Madam Durena, a note of urgency in her voice. ‘Izmila!’ She reached over and shook her partner by her heavy shoulders.

‘Zmila,’ Madam Corvaleur agreed in a sleepy, blubbery voice. Her mouth lolled open and she drooled remnants of chocolate and cherry onto her five-solari chits. ‘Mmmmmilllaaaaaaaa. Verry . . . odd . . . oddest . . .’

‘Play sits with Madam Corvaleur.’ The dealer couldn’t keep his surprise out of his voice. ‘Madam Corvaleur must state a preference.’

‘Izmila! Concentrate!’ Madam Durena spoke in an urgent whisper.

‘There are . . . cards . . .’ mumbled Corvaleur. ‘Look out, Mara . . . soooo . . . many . . . cards. On table.’

She followed that up with, ‘Blemble . . . na . . . fla . . . gah.’

And then she was out cold.

‘Final default,’ said the dealer after a few seconds. With his crop, he swept all of Madam Durena’s markers away from her, counting rapidly. Locke and Jean would take everything on the table. The looming threat of a thousand-solari loss had just become a gain of equal magnitude, and Locke sighed with relief.

The dealer considered the spectacle of Madam Corvaleur using her wooden markers as a pillow, and he coughed into his hand.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘the house will, ah, provide new chits of the appropriate value in place of . . . those still in use.’

‘Of course,’ said Jean, gently patting the little mountain of Durena’s markers suddenly piled up before him. In the crowd behind them, Locke could hear noises of bewilderment, consternation and surprise. A light ripple of applause was eventually coaxed into existence by some of the more generous observers, but it died quickly. They were faintly embarrassed, rather than exhilarated, to see a notable like Madam Corvaleur inebriated by a mere six drinks.

‘Hmmmph,’ said Madam Durena, stubbing out her cigar in the gold pot and rising to her feet. She made a show of straightening her jacket – black brocaded velvet decorated with platinum buttons and cloth-of-silver, worth a good fraction of everything she’d bet that night. ‘Master Kosta, Master de Ferra . . . it appears we must admit to being outmatched.’

‘But certainly not outplayed,’ said Locke, summoning up a snake-charming smile along with the pulverized remnants of his wits. ‘You very nearly had us . . . um, sewn up.’

‘And the whole world is wobbling around me,’ said Jean, whose hands were as steady as a jeweller’s, and had been throughout the entire game.

‘Gentlemen, I have appreciated your stimulating company,’ said Madam Durena in a tone of voice that indicated she hadn’t. ‘Another game later this week, perhaps? Surely you must allow us a chance at revenge, for honour’s sake.’

‘Nothing would please us more,’ said Jean, to which Locke nodded enthusiastically, making the contents of his skull ache. At that, Madam Durena coldly held out her hand and consented for the two of them to kiss the air above it. When they had done so, as though making obeisance to a particularly irritable snake, four of Requin’s attendants appeared to help move the snoring Madam Corvaleur somewhere more decorous.

‘Gods, it must be tedious, watching us try to drink one another under the table night after night,’ said Jean. He flipped the dealer a five-solari chit; it was customary to leave a small gratuity for the attendant.

‘I don’t believe so, sir. How would you like your change?’

‘What change?’ Jean smiled. ‘Keep the whole thing.’

The attendant betrayed human emotions for the second time that night; relatively well-off as he was, one little wooden chit was half again his annual salary. He stifled a gasp when Locke threw him another dozen.

‘Fortune is a lady who likes to be passed around,’ said Locke. ‘Buy a house, maybe. I’m having a little trouble counting at the moment.’

‘Sweet gods – *many* thanks, gentlemen!’ The attendant took a quick glance around and then spoke under his breath. ‘Those two ladies don’t lose very often, you know. In fact, this is the first time I can remember.’

‘Victory has its price,’ said Locke. ‘I suspect my head will be paying it when I wake up tomorrow.’

Madam Corvaleur was hauled carefully down the stairs, with Madam Durena following to keep a close eye on the men carrying her card-partner. The crowd dispersed; those observers who remained at their tables called for attendants, food, new decks of cards for games of their own.

Locke and Jean gathered their markers (fresh ones, sans slobber, were swiftly provided by the attendant to replace Madam Corvaleur’s) in the customary velvet-lined wooden boxes and made their way to the stairs.

‘Congratulations, gentlemen,’ said the attendant guarding the way up to the sixth floor. The tinkle of glass on glass and the murmur of conversation could be heard filtering down from above.

‘Thank you,’ said Locke. ‘I’m afraid that something in Madam Corvaleur gave way just a hand or two before I might have done the same.’

He and Jean slowly made their way down the stairs that curved all the way around the inside of the Sinspire’s exterior wall. They were dressed as men of credit and consequence in the current height of Verrari summer fashion. Locke (whose hair had been alchemically shifted to a sunny shade of blond) wore a caramel-brown coat with a cinched waist and flaring knee-length tails; his huge triple-layered cuffs were panelled in orange and black and decorated with gold buttons. He wore no waistcoat, just a sweat-

soaked tunic of the finest silk under a loose black neck-cloth. Jean was dressed similarly, though his coat was the greyish-blue of a sea under clouds, and his belly was cinched up with a wide black sash, the same colour as the short, curly hairs of his beard.

Down past floors of notables they went . . . past queens of Verrari commerce with their decorative young companions of both sexes on their arms like pets. Past men and women with purchased Lashani titles, staring across cards and wine decanters at lesser dons and donās from Camorr; past Vadran shipmasters in tight black coats, with sea-tans like masks over their sharp, pale features. Locke recognized at least two members of the *Priori*, the collection of merchant councils that theoretically ruled Tal Verrar. Deep pockets appeared to be the primary qualification for membership.

Dice fell and glasses clinked; celebrants laughed and coughed and cursed and sighed. Currents of smoke moved languidly in the warm air, carrying scents of perfume and wine, sweat and roast meats, and here and there the resinous hint of alchemical drugs.

Locke had seen genuine palaces and mansions before; the Sinspire, opulent as it was, was not so very much more handsome than the homes many of these people would be returning to when they finally ran out of night to play in. The real magic of the Sinspire was woven from its capricious exclusivity; deny something to enough people and sooner or later it will grow a mystique as thick as fog.

Nearly hidden at the rear of the first floor was a heavy wooden booth manned by several unusually large attendants. Luckily, there was no line. Locke set his box down on the counter-top beneath the booth's only window, a bit too forcefully.

‘All to my account.’

‘My pleasure, Master Kosta,’ said the chief attendant as he took the box. Leocanto Kosta, merchant-speculator of Talisham, was well known in this kingdom of wine fumes and wagers. The attendant swiftly changed Locke’s pile of wooden chits into a few marks on a ledger. In beating Durenna and Corvaleur, even minus his tip to the dealer, Locke’s cut of the winnings came to nearly five hundred solari.

‘I understand that congratulations are in order to both of you, Master de Ferra,’ said the attendant as Locke stepped back to let Jean approach the counter with his own box. Jerome de Ferra, also of Talisham, was Leocanto’s boon companion. They were a pair of fictional peas in a pod.

Suddenly, Locke felt a hand fall onto his left shoulder. He turned warily and found himself facing a woman with curly dark hair, richly dressed in the same colours as the Sinspire attendants. One side of her face was sublimely beautiful; the other side was a leathery brown half-mask, wrinkled as though it had been badly burned. When she smiled, the damaged side of her lips failed to move. It looked to Locke as though a living woman was somehow struggling to emerge from within a rough clay sculpture.

Selendri, Requin’s major-domo.

The hand that she had placed on his shoulder (her left, on the burned side) wasn’t real. It was a solid brass simulacrum, and it gleamed dully in the lantern light as she withdrew it.

‘The house congratulates you,’ she said in her eerie, lispng voice, ‘for good manners as well as considerable fortitude, and wishes you and Master de Ferra to know that you would both be welcome on the sixth floor, should you choose to exercise the privilege.’

Locke's smile was quite genuine. 'Many thanks, on behalf of myself and my partner,' he said with tipsy glibness. 'The kind regard of the house is, of course, extremely flattering.'

She nodded non-committally, then slipped away into the crowd as quickly as she'd come. Eyebrows went up appreciatively here and there – few of Requin's guests, to Locke's knowledge, were appraised of their increasing social status by Selendri herself.

'We're a commodity in demand, my dear Jerome,' he said as they made their way through the crowd toward the front doors.

'For the time being,' said Jean.

'Master de Ferra.' The head doorman beamed as they approached. 'And Master Kosta. May I call for a carriage?'

'No need, thanks,' said Locke. 'I'll fall over sideways if I don't flush my head with some night air. We'll walk.'

'Very good then, sir.'

With military precision, four attendants held the doors open for Locke and Jean to pass. The two thieves stepped carefully down a wide set of stone steps covered with a red velvet carpet. That carpet, as the whole city knew, was thrown out and replaced each night. As a result, in Tal Verrar alone could one find armies of beggars routinely sleeping on piles of red velvet scraps.

The view was breathtaking; to their right, the whole crescent sweep of the island was visible beyond the silhouettes of other chance-houses. There was relative darkness in the north, in contrast to the aura-like glow of the Golden Steps. Beyond the city, to the south, west and north, the Sea of Brass gleamed phosphorescent silver, lit by three moons

in a cloudless sky. Here and there the sails of distant ships reached up from the quicksilver tableau, ghostly pale.

Locke could gaze downward to his left and see across the staggered rooftops of the island's five lower tiers, a vertigo-inducing view despite the solidity of the stones beneath his feet. All around him was the murmur of human pleasure and the clatter of horse-drawn carriages on cobbles; there were at least a dozen moving or waiting along the straight avenue atop the sixth tier. Above, the Sinspire reared up into the opalescent darkness, its alchemical lanterns bright, like a candle meant to draw the attentions of the gods.

'And now, my dear professional pessimist,' said Locke as they stepped away from the Sinspire and acquired relative privacy, 'my worry-merchant, my tireless font of doubt and derision . . . what do you have to say to *that*?'

'Oh, very little, to be sure, Master Kosta. It's so hard to think, overawed as I am with the sublime genius of your plan.'

'That bears some vague resemblance to sarcasm.'

'Gods forbend,' said Jean. 'You wound me! Your inexpressible criminal virtues have triumphed again, as inevitably as the tides come and go. I cast myself at your feet and beg for absolution. Yours is the genius that nourishes the heart of the world.'

'And now you're—'

'If only there was a leper handy,' interrupted Jean, 'so you could lay your hands on him and magically heal him—'

'Oh, you're just farting out of your mouth because you're jealous.'

‘It’s possible,’ said Jean. ‘Actually, we are substantially enriched, not caught, not dead, more famous and welcome on the next floor up. I must admit that I was wrong to call it a silly scheme.’

‘Really? Huh.’ Locke reached under his coat lapel as he spoke. ‘Because I have to admit, it *was* a silly scheme. Damned irresponsible. One drink more and I would have been finished. I’m actually pretty bloody surprised we pulled it off.’

He fumbled beneath his lapel for a second or two, then withdrew a little pad of wool about as wide and long as his thumb. A puff of dust was shaken from the wool when Locke slipped it into one of his outer pockets, and he wiped his hands vigorously on his sleeves as they walked along.

“‘Nearly lost’ is just another way to say ‘finally won’,’ said Jean.

‘Nonetheless, the liquor almost did me in. Next time I’m that optimistic about my own capacity, correct me with a hatchet to the skull.’

‘I’ll be glad to correct you with *two*.’

It was Madam Izmila Corvaleur who’d made the scheme possible. Madam Corvaleur, who’d first crossed paths with ‘Leocanto Kosta’ at a gaming table a few weeks earlier, who had the reliable habit of eating with her fingers to annoy her opponents while she played cards.

Carousel Hazard really *couldn’t* be cheated by any traditional means. None of Requin’s attendants would stack a deck, not once in a hundred years, not even in exchange for a dukedom. Nor could any player alter the carousel, select one vial in favour of another or serve a vial to anyone else. With all the usual means of introducing a foreign substance to another player guarded against, the only remaining possibility was

for a player to do herself in by slowly, willingly taking in something subtle and unorthodox. Something delivered by a means beyond the ken of even a healthy paranoia.

Like a narcotic powder, dusted on the playing cards in minute quantities by Locke and Jean, then gradually passed around the table to a woman continually licking her fingers as she played.

Bela paranella was a colourless, tasteless alchemical powder also known as ‘the night friend’. It was popular with rich people of a nervous disposition, who took it to ease themselves into deep, restful slumber. When mixed with alcohol, *bela paranella* was rapidly effective in tiny quantities; the two substances were as complementary as fire and dry parchment. It would have been widely used for criminal purposes if not for the fact that it sold for twenty times its own weight in white iron.

‘Gods, that woman had the constitution of a war-galley,’ said Locke. ‘She must have started ingesting some of the powder by the third or fourth hand . . . probably could’ve killed a pair of wild boars in heat with less.’

‘At least we got what we wanted,’ said Jean, removing his own powder reservoir from his coat. He considered it for a moment, shrugged and slipped it into a pocket.

‘We did indeed . . . and I saw him!’ said Locke. ‘Requin. He was on the stairs, watching us for most of the hands in the middle game. We *must* have aroused a personal interest.’ The exciting ramifications of this helped clear some of the haze from Locke’s thoughts. ‘Why else send Selendri herself to pat our backs?’

‘Well, assume you’re correct. So what now? Do you want to push on with it, like you mentioned, or do you want to take it slow? Maybe gamble around on the fifth and sixth floors for a few more weeks?’

‘A few more weeks? To hell with that. We’ve been kicking around this gods-damned city for two years now; if we’ve finally cracked Requin’s shell, I say we bloody well go for it.’

‘You’re going to suggest tomorrow night, aren’t you?’

‘His curiosity’s piqued. Let’s strike while the blade is fresh from the forge.’

‘I suspect that drink has made you impulsive.’

‘Drink makes me see funny; the gods made me impulsive.’

‘You there,’ came a voice from the street in front of them. ‘Hold it!’

Locke tensed. ‘I beg your pardon?’

A young, harried-looking Verrari man with long black hair was holding his hands out, palms facing toward Locke and Jean. A small, well-dressed crowd had gathered beside him, at the edge of a trim lawn that Locke recognized as the duelling green.

‘Hold it, sirs, I beg of you,’ said the young man. ‘I’m afraid it’s an affair, and there may be a bolt flying past. Might I beg of you to wait but a moment?’

‘Oh. *Oh.*’ Locke and Jean relaxed simultaneously. If someone was duelling with crossbows, it was common courtesy as well as good sense to wait beside the duelling ground until the shots were taken. That way, neither participant would be distracted by movement in the background, or accidentally bury a bolt in a passer-by.

The duelling green was about forty yards long and half as wide, lit by a soft white lantern hanging in a black iron frame at each of its four corners. Two duellists stood in the centre of the green with their seconds, each man casting four pale-grey shadows in a crisscross pattern. Locke had little personal inclination to watch, but he reminded himself that he was supposed to be Leocanto Kosta, a man of worldly indifference to strangers

punching holes in one another. He and Jean squeezed into the crowd of spectators as unobtrusively as possible; a similar crowd had formed on the other side of the green.

One of the duellists was a very young man, dressed in fine, loose gentleman's clothing of a fashionable cut; he wore optics, and his hair hung to his shoulders in well-tended ringlets.

His red-jacketed opponent was a great deal older, a bit hunched over and weathered. He looked active and determined enough to pose a threat, however. Each man held a lightweight crossbow – what Camorri thieves would call an alley-piece.

'Gentlemen,' said the younger duellist's second. 'Please. Can there be no accommodation?'

'If the Lashani gentleman will withdraw his imprecation,' added the younger duellist, his voice high and nervous, 'I would be eminently satisfied, with the merest recognition—'

'No, there *cannot*,' said the man standing beside the older duellist. 'His Lordship is not in the habit of tendering apologies for mere statements of obvious fact.'

'... with the *merest recognition*,' continued the young duellist, desperately, 'that the incident was an unfortunate misunderstanding, and that it need not—'

'Were he to condescend to speak to you again,' said the older duellist's second, 'his Lordship would no doubt also note that you wail like a *bitch*, and would enquire as to whether you're equally capable of biting like one.'

The younger duellist stood speechless for a few seconds, then gestured rudely toward the older men with his free hand.

‘I am forced,’ said his second, ‘I am, ah, forced . . . to allow that there may be no accommodation. Let the gentlemen stand . . . back to back.’

The two opponents walked toward one another – the older man marched with vigour while the younger still stepped hesitantly – and turned their backs to one another.

‘You shall have ten paces,’ said the younger man’s second, with bitter resignation. ‘Wait then, and on my signal you may turn and loose.’

Slowly he counted out the steps; slowly the two opponents walked away from one another. The younger man was shaking very badly indeed. Locke felt a ball of unaccustomed tension growing in his own stomach. Since when had he become such a damned soft-hearted fellow? Just because he preferred not to watch didn’t mean he should be afraid to do so . . . yet the feeling in his stomach paid no heed to the thoughts in his head.

‘. . . nine . . . ten. Stand fast,’ said the young duellist’s second. ‘Stand fast . . . *Turn and loose!*’

The younger man whirled first, his face a mask of terror; he threw out his right hand and let fly. A sharp *twang* sounded across the green. His opponent didn’t even jerk back as the bolt hissed through the air beside his head, missing by at least the width of a hand.

The red-jacketed old man completed his own turn more slowly, his eyes bright and his mouth set into a scowl. His younger opponent stared at him for several seconds, as though trying to will his bolt to come flying back like a trained bird. He shuddered, lowered his crossbow and then threw it down to the grass. With his hands on his hips, he stood waiting, breathing in deep and noisy gulps.

His opponent regarded him briefly, then snorted. 'Be fucked,' he said, and he raised his crossbow in both hands. His shot was perfect; there was a wet crack and the younger duellist toppled with a feathered bolt dead in the centre of his chest. He fell onto his back, clawing at his coat and tunic, spitting up dark blood. Half a dozen spectators rushed toward him, while one young woman in a silver evening gown fell to her knees and screamed.

'We'll get back just in time for dinner,' said the older duellist to nobody in particular. He tossed his own crossbow carelessly to the ground behind him and stomped off toward one of the nearby chance-houses, with his second at his side.

'Sweet fucking Perelandro,' said Locke, forgetting Leocanto Kosta for a moment and thinking out loud. 'What a way to manage things.'

'You don't approve, sir?' A lovely young woman in a black silk dress regarded Locke with disconcertingly penetrating eyes. She couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen.

'I understand that some differences of opinion need to be settled with steel,' said Jean, butting in, appearing to recognize that Locke was still a bit too tipsy for his own good. 'But standing before a crossbow bolt seems foolish. Blades strike me as a more honest test of skill.'

'Rapiers are tedious; all that back and forth, and rarely a killing strike right away,' said the young woman. 'Bolts are fast, clean and merciful. You can hack at someone all night with a rapier and fail to kill them.'

'I am quite compelled to agree with you,' muttered Locke.

The woman raised an eyebrow but said nothing; a moment later she was gone, vanished into the dispersing crowd.

The contented murmur of the night – the laughter and chatter of the small clusters of men and women making time beneath the stars – had died briefly while the duel took place, but now it rose up once again. The woman in the silver dress beat her fists against the grass, sobbing, while the crowd around the fallen duellist seemed to sag in unison. The bolt's work was clearly done.

'Fast, clean and merciful,' said Locke softly. 'Idiots.'

Jean sighed. 'Neither of us has any right to offer that sort of observation, since "gods-damned idiots" is likely to be inscribed on our grave-markers.'

'I've had reasons for doing what I've done, and so have you.'

'I'm sure those duellists felt the same way.'

'Let's get the hell out of here,' said Locke. 'Let's walk off the fumes in my head and get back to the inn. Gods, I feel old and sour. I see things like this and I wonder if I was that bloody stupid when I was that boy's age.'

'You were worse,' said Jean. 'Until quite recently. Probably still are.'