

Prologue:

The boy who stole too much

1

At the height of the long wet summer of the Seventy-Seventh Year of Sendovani, the Thiefmaker of Camorr paid a sudden and unannounced visit to the Eyeless Priest at the Temple of Perelandro, desperately hoping to sell him the Lamora boy.

‘Have I got a deal for you!’ the Thiefmaker began, perhaps inauspiciously.

‘Another deal like Calo and Galdo, maybe?’ said the Eyeless Priest. ‘I’ve still got my hands full training those giggling idiots out of every bad habit they picked up from you and replacing them with the bad habits I need.’

‘Now, Chains.’ The Thiefmaker shrugged. ‘I told you they were shit-flinging little monkeys when we made the deal, and it was good enough for you at the—’

‘Or maybe another deal like Sabetha?’ The priest’s richer, deeper voice chased the Thiefmaker’s objection right back down his throat. ‘I’m sure you recall charging me everything but my dead mother’s kneecaps for her. I should’ve paid you in copper and watched you spring a rupture trying to haul it all away.’

‘Ahhhhhh, but she was special, and this boy, this boy, he’s special too,’ said the Thiefmaker. ‘Everything you asked me to look for after I sold you Calo and Galdo. Everything you liked so much about Sabetha! He’s Camorri, but a mongrel. Therin and Vadran blood. He’s got larceny in his heart, sure as the sea’s full of fish piss. And I can even let you have him at a . . . a discount.’

The Eyeless Priest spent a long moment mulling this. ‘You’ll pardon me,’ he finally said, ‘if experience suggests that I would be wise to meet unexpected generosity from you by arming myself and putting my back against a wall.’

The Thiefmaker tried to let a vaguely sincere expression scurry onto his face, where it froze in evident discomfort. His shrug was theatrically casual. ‘There are, ah,

problems with the boy, yes. But the problems are unique to his situation in my care. Were he under yours, I'm sure they would, ahhhh, vanish.'

'Oh. Oh. You have a *magic* boy. Why didn't you say so?' The priest scratched his forehead beneath the white silk blindfold that covered his eyes. '*Magnificent*. I'll plant him in the fucking ground and grow a vine to an enchanted land beyond the clouds.'

'Ahhhhh! Ah ah ah, I've tasted that flavour of sarcasm from you before, Chains.' The Thiefmaker gave an arthritic mock bow. 'Is it really so hard to say that you're interested?'

The Eyeless Priest spat. 'Suppose Calo, Galdo and Sabetha might be able to use a new playmate, or at least a punching bag. *Suppose* I'm willing to spend about three coppers and a bowl of piss for an unlooked-for mystery boy. What's the boy's problem?'

'His problem,' said the Thiefmaker, 'is that if I can't sell him to you, I'm going to have to slit his throat and throw him in the bay. And I'm going to have to do it *tonight*.'

2

On the night the Lamora boy had come to live under the Thiefmaker's care, the old graveyard on Shades' Hill had been full of children, standing at silent attention and waiting for their new brothers and sisters to be led down into the mausoleums.

The Thiefmaker's wards all carried candles; their cold blue light shone through the silver curtains of river mist as street lamps might glimmer through a smoke-grimed window. A chain of ghostlight wound its way down from the hilltop, through the stone markers and ceremonial paths, down to the wide glass bridge over the Coalsmoke canal, half-visible in the bloodwarm fog that seeped up from Camorr's wet bones on summer nights.

'Come now my loves, my jewels, my newlyfound, keep the pace,' whispered the Thiefmaker as he nudged the last of the thirty or so Catchfire orphans over the Coalsmoke bridge. 'These lights are just your new friends, come to guide your way up

my hill. Move now, my treasures. There's darkness wasting, and we have so much to talk about.'

In rare moments of vain reflection, the Thiefmaker thought of himself as an artist. A sculptor, to be precise, with orphans as his clay and the old graveyard on Shades' Hill as his studio.

Eighty-eight thousand souls generated a certain steady volume of waste; this waste included a constant trickle of lost, useless and abandoned children. Slavers got some of them, to be sure – hauling them off to Tal Verarr or the Jeremite islands. Slavery was technically illegal in Camorr, but the act of enslavement itself was winked at if there was no one left to speak for the victim.

So, slavers got some, and plain stupidity took a few more. Starvation and the diseases it brought were also common ways to go for those that lacked the courage or the skill to pluck a living from the city around them. And then, of course, those with courage but no skill often wound up swinging from the Black Bridge in front of the Palace of Patience. The Duke's magistrates disposed of little thieves with the same rope they used on bigger ones, though they did see to it that the little ones went over the side of the bridge with weights tied to their ankles to help them hang properly.

Any orphans left after dicing with all of those colourful possibilities were swept up by the Thiefmaker's own crew, brought in one at a time or in small groups to hear his soothing voice and eat a hot meal. Soon enough they would learn what sort of life awaited them beneath the graveyard that was the heart of his realm, where seven score cast-off children bent the knee to a single bent old man.

'Quick-step, my lovelies, my new sons and daughters; follow the line of lights and step to the top. We're almost home, almost fed. Out of the rain and the mist and the stinking heat.'

Plagues were a time of special opportunity for the Thiefmaker, and the Catchfire orphans had crawled away from his very favourite sort: Black Whisper. It fell on the

Catchfire district from points unknown, and the quarantine had gone up (death by clothyard shaft for anyone trying to cross a canal or escape on a boat) in time to save the rest of the city from everything but unease and paranoia. Black Whisper meant a miserable death for anyone over the age of eleven or twelve (as near as physikers could figure, for the plague was not content to reap by overly firm rules) and a few days of harmless swollen eyes and red cheeks for anyone younger.

By the fifth day of the quarantine there were no more screams and no more attempted canal crossings, and so Catchfire evaded the namesake fate that had befallen it so many times before in years of pestilence. By the eleventh day, when the quarantine was lifted and the Duke's ghouls went in to survey the mess, perhaps one in eight of the four hundred children previously living there had survived the wait. They had already formed gangs for mutual protection and learned certain cruel necessities of life without adults.

The Thiefmaker was waiting as they were coralled and led out from the sinister silence of their old neighbourhood.

He paid good silver for the best thirty, and even more good silver for the silence of the ghouls and constables he relieved of the children. Then he led them, dazed and hollow-cheeked and smelling like hell, into the darkness and the steambath mists of the Camorri night, toward the old graveyard on Shades' Hill.

The Lamora boy was the youngest and smallest of the lot, five or six years old, nothing but jutting bones under skin rich with dirt and hollow angles. The Thiefmaker hadn't even chosen him; Lamora had simply crept away with the others as though he belonged. The Thiefmaker was not unaware of this, but he'd lived the sort of life in which even a single free plague orphan was a windfall not to be overlooked.

It was the summer of the Seventy-Seventh year of Gandolo, Father of Opportunities, Lord of Coin and Commerce. The Thiefmaker padded through the shrouded night, shepherding his ragged line of children.

In just two years he would be all but begging Father Chains the Eyeless Priest to take the Lamora boy off his hands, and sharpening his knives in case the priest refused.

The Eyeless Priest scratched his grey-stubbed throat. 'No shit?'

'None whatsoever.' The Thiefmaker reached down the front of a doublet that was several years past merely shabby and pulled out a leather pouch on a fine leather cord; the pouch was dyed the rust-red of dried blood. 'Already went to the big man and got permission. I'll do the boy ear-to-ear and send him for teeth lessons.'

'Gods. It's a sob story after all.' For an Eyeless Priest, the fingers he jabbed into the Thiefmaker's sternum struck swift and sure. 'Find some other lackwit to shackle with the chains of your conscience.'

'Conscience can go piss up a chimney, Chains. I'm talking avarice, yours and mine. I can't keep the boy and I'm offering you a unique opportunity, a genuine bargain.'

'If the boy's too unruly to keep, why can't you just pound some wisdom into him and let him ripen to a proper age of sale?'

'Out of the question, Chains. Limited options. I can't just slap him around because I can't let any of the other little shits know what he's, ahhh, done. If any of them had the slightest inclination to pull what he's pulled . . . gods! I'd never be able to control them again. I can either kill him quick, or sell him quicker. No profit versus a paltry sum. So guess which one I prefer?'

'The boy's done something you can't even mention in front of the others?' Chains massaged his forehead above the blindfold and sighed. 'Shit. This sounds like something I might actually be interested in hearing.'

An old Camorri proverb has it that the only constant in the soul of man is inconstancy; anything and everything can pass out of fashion, even something as utilitarian as a hill stuffed full of corpses.

Shades' Hill was the first graveyard of quality in Camorr's history, ideally situated to keep the bones of the formerly well-fed above the salty grasp of the Iron Sea. Yet over time the balance of power shifted in the families of vault-carvers and morticians and professional pallbearers; fewer and fewer of the quality were interred on Shades' Hill, as the nearby Hill of Whispers offered more room for larger and gaudier monuments with commensurately higher commissions. Wars, plagues and intrigues ensured that the number of living families with monuments to tend on Shades' Hill dropped steadily over the decades. Eventually, the only regular visitors were the priests and priestesses of Aza Guilla, who sleep in tombs during their apprenticeships, and the homeless orphans that squatted in the dust and darkness of the ill-tended burial vaults.

The Thiefmaker (though of course he wasn't known as such just yet) had wound up sharing one of these vaults at the low point of his life, when he was nothing but a miserable curiosity – a pickpocket with nine broken fingers.

At first, his relationship with the Shades' Hill orphans was half-bullying and half-pleading; some vestigial need for an authority figure kept them from killing him in his sleep. For his part, he grudgingly began to explain to them some of the tricks of his trade.

As his fingers slowly mended (after a fashion, for most of them would forever resemble twice-broken twigs), he began to impart more and more of his crooked wisdom to the dirty children that dodged the rain and the city watch with him. Their numbers increased, as did their income, and they began to make more room for themselves in the wet stone chambers of the old graveyard.

In time, the brittle-boned pickpocket became the Thiefmaker; Shades' Hill became his kingdom.

The Lamora boy and his fellow Catchfire orphans entered this kingdom some twenty

years after its founding; what they saw that night was a graveyard no deeper than the dirt piled above the old tombs. A great network of tunnels and galleries had been dug between the major vaults, their hard-packed walls threaded with supports like the ribs of long-dead wooden dragons. The previous occupants had all been quietly disinterred and dropped into the bay. Shades' Hill was now an ant-mound of orphan thieves.

Down the black mouth of the topmost mausoleum the Catchfire orphans went, down the wood-ribbed tunnel lit by the flickering silver fire of cool alchemical globes, with greasy tendrils of mist chasing at their ankles. Shades' Hill orphans watched them from every nook and warren, their eyes cold but curious. The thick tunnel air was saturated with the smells of night soil and stale bodies – an odor the Catchfire orphans soon multiplied with their own presence.

'In! In!' cried the Thiefmaker, rubbing his hands together. 'My home, your home, and welcome to it! Here we all have one thing in common – no mothers and no fathers. Alas for that, but now you'll have as many sisters and brothers as you can need, and dry earth over your head! A place . . . a family.'

A train of Shades' Hill orphans swept down the tunnel in his wake, snuffing their eerie blue candles as they went, until only the silver radiance of the wall-globes remained to light the way.

At the heart of the Thiefmaker's realm was a vast warm hollow with a packed dirt floor, perhaps twice the height of a tall man, thirty yards wide and long. A single high-backed chair of oiled black witchwood stood against the far wall; this the Thiefmaker eased himself into with a grateful sigh.

Dozens of grotty blankets were set out on the floor, covered with food – bowls of bony chicken marinated in cheap almond wine, soft thresher-fish tails wrapped in bacon and soaked in vinegar, and brown bread flavoured with sausage grease. There were also salted peas and lentils as well as bowls of past-ripe tomatoes and pears. Poor stuff, but in a quantity and variety most of the Catchfire orphans had never seen before. Their attack on the meal was immediate and uncoordinated; the Thiefmaker smiled indulgently.

'I'm not stupid enough to get between you and a decent meal, my dears. So eat your fill; eat more than your fill. Make up for lost time. We'll talk after.'

As the Catchfire orphans stuffed their faces, Shades' Hill orphans crowded in around them, watching and saying nothing. Soon the chamber was packed and the air grew staler still. The feasting continued until there was literally nothing left; the survivors of the Black Whisper sucked the last vinegar and grease from their fingers and then turned their eyes warily to the Thiefmaker and his minions. The Thiefmaker held up three crooked fingers, as though on cue.

'Business!' he cried. 'Three items of business.'

'First,' he said, 'you're here because I *paid* for you. I paid extra to get to you before anyone *else* could. I can assure you that every single one of your little friends that I didn't pay for has gone to the slavers. There's nothing else to be done with orphans. No place to keep you, nobody to take you in. The watch sells your sort for wine money, my dears; watch-sergeants neglect to mention you in their reports, and watch-captains neglect to give a shit.

'And,' he continued, 'now that the Catchfire quarantine's lifted, every slaver and would-be slaver in Camorr is going to be *very excited* and *very alert*. You're free to get up and leave this hill any time you see fit – with my confident assurance that you'll soon be sucking cocks or chained to an oar for the rest of your life.

'This leads me to my second point. All of my *friends* you see around you,' he gestured to the Shades' Hill orphans lined up against the walls, 'can leave whenever they please, and mostly go wherever they please, because they are under my protection. I know,' he said with a long and solemn face, 'that I am nothing especially formidable considered as an individual; do not be misled. I have powerful friends, my dears. What I offer is security by virtue of those friends. Should anyone, a slaver, for example, dare to set a hand on one of my Shades' Hill boys or girls, well, the consequences would be immediate and gratifyingly, ahhh, *merciless*.'

When none of his newcomers seemed appropriately enthusiastic, the Thiefmaker cleared his throat. 'I'd have the miserable fucking bastards killed. Savvy?'

They were indeed.

‘Which brings us neatly to my third item of interest, namely, all of you. This little family always needs new brothers and sisters, and you may consider yourselves invited, *encouraged*, no less, to, ahhh, condescend to offer us the pleasure of your *intimate and permanent* acquaintance. Make this hill your home, myself your master, and these fine boys and girls your trusted siblings. You’ll be fed, sheltered and protected. Or you can leave right now and end up as fresh fruit in some whorehouse in Jerem. Any takers?

None of the newcomers said anything.

‘I knew I could count on you, my dear Catchfire jewels.’ The Thieftmaker spread his arms wide and smiled, revealing a half-moon of teeth brown as swampwater. ‘But, of course, there must be responsibilities. There must be give and take, like for like. Food doesn’t sprout from my arsehole. Chamber pots don’t empty themselves. Catch my meaning?’

There were hesitant nods from about half the Catchfire orphans.

‘The rules are simple! You’ll learn them all in good time. For now, let’s keep it like this. Anybody who eats, works. Anyone who works, eats. Which brings us to work, my fourth— Oh, dear. Children, children. Do an absent-minded old man the favour of imagining that he held up four fingers. This is my fourth important point.

‘Now, we’ve got our chores here on the hill, but we’ve got chores elsewhere that also need doing. Other jobs . . . delicate jobs, unusual jobs. Fun and interesting jobs. All about the city, some by day and some by night. They will require courage, deftness and, ahhh, discretion. We would so *love* to have your assistance with these . . . special tasks.’

He pointed to the one boy he hadn’t paid for, the small hanger-on, now staring up at him with hard, sullen eyes above a mouth still plastered with tomato innards.

‘You, surplus boy, thirty-first of thirty. What say you? Are you the helpful sort? Are you willing to assist your new brothers and sisters with their interesting work?’

The boy mulled this over for a few seconds.

‘You mean,’ he said in a high thin voice, ‘that you want us to steal things.’

The old man stared down at the little boy for a very long time while a number of

the Shades' Hill orphans giggled behind their hands.

'Yes,' the Thiefmaker said at last, nodding slowly. 'I might just mean that, though you have a very, ahhh, *uncompromising* view of a certain exercise of personal initiative that we prefer to frame in more artfully indeterminate terms. Not that I expect that to mean anything to you. What's your name, boy?'

'Lamora.'

'Your parents must have been misers, to give you nothing but a surname. What *else* did they call you?'

The boy seemed to think very deeply about this.

'I'm called Locke,' he finally said. 'After my father.'

'Very good. Rolls right off the tongue, it does. Well, Locke-after-your-father Lamora, you come here and have a word with me. The rest of you, shuffle off. Your brothers and sisters will show you where you'll be sleeping tonight. They'll also show you where to empty this and where to put that – chores, if you savvy. Just to tidy this hall up for now, but there'll be more jobs for you in the days to come. I promise it will all make sense by the time you find out what they call me in the world beyond our little hill.'

Locke moved to stand beside the Thiefmaker where he sat on his high-backed throne; the throng of newcomers rose and milled about until larger, older Shades' Hill orphans began collaring them and issuing simple instructions. Soon enough, Locke and the master of Shades' Hill were as alone as they could hope to be.

'My boy,' the Thiefmaker said, 'I'm used to having to train a certain reticence out of my new sons and daughters when they first arrive in Shades' Hill. Do you know what *reticence* is?'

The Lamora boy shook his head. His greasy dust-brown bangs were plastered down atop his round little face, and the tomato stains around his mouth had grown drier and more unseemly. The Thiefmaker dabbed delicately at these stains with one cuff of his tattered blue coat; the boy didn't flinch.

'It means they've been told that stealing things is bad, and I need to work around

that until they get used to the idea, savvy? Well, you don't seem to suffer from any such reticence, so you and I might just get along. Stolen before, have you?'

The boy nodded.

'Before the plague, even?'

Another nod.

'Thought so. My dear, dear boy . . . you didn't, ahhh, lose your parents to the plague, now, did you?'

The boy looked down at his feet and barely shook his head.

'So you've already been looking after yourself, for some time. It's nothing to be ashamed of, now. It might even secure you a place of some respect here, if only I can find a means to put you to the test . . .'

By way of response, the Lamora boy reached under his rags and held something out to the Thiefmaker. Two small leather purses fell into the old man's open palm – cheap things, stiff and stained, with frayed cords around their necks.

'Where did you get these, then?'

'The watchmen,' Locke whispered. 'Some of the watchmen picked us up and carried us.'

The Thiefmaker jerked back as though an asp had just sunk its fangs into his spine, and stared down at the purses with disbelief. 'You lifted these from the fucking city watch? From the yellowjackets?'

Locke nodded, more enthusiastically. 'They picked us up and *carried us*.'

'Gods,' the Thiefmaker whispered. 'Oh, gods. You may have just fucked us all superbly, Locke-after-your-father Lamora. Quite superbly indeed.'

'He broke the Secret Peace the first night I had him, the cheeky little bastard.' The Thiefmaker was now seated more comfortably in the rooftop garden of the Eyeless

Priest's temple, with a tarred leather cup of wine in his hands. It was the sourest sort of second-hand near-vinegar, but it was another sign that genuine negotiations might yet break out. 'Never happened before, nor since.'

'Someone taught him to charm a coat, but didn't tell him that the yellowjackets were strictly off-limits.' Father Chains pursed his lips. 'Very curious, that. Very curious indeed. Our dear Capa Barsavi would so love to meet such an individual.'

'I never found out who it was. The boy claimed he'd just taught himself, but that's crap. Five-year-olds play with dead fish and horse turds, Chains. They don't invent the finer points of soft-touching and purse-cutting on a whim.'

'What did you do about the purses?'

'I flew back to Catchfire watch station and kissed arses and boots until my lips were black. Explained to the watch-captain in question that one of the newcomers didn't understand how things worked in Camorr, that I was returning the purses with interest, begging their magnanimous apologies and all the gracious etcetera etcetera.'

'And they accepted?'

'Money makes a man mirthful, Chains. I stuffed those purses full to bursting with silver. Then I gave every man in the squad drink money for five or six nights and we all agreed they would hoist a few to the health of Capa Barsavi, who *surely* needn't be, ahhh, troubled by something as inconsequential as his loyal Thiefmaker fucking up and letting a five-year-old breach the bloody Peace.'

'So,' the Eyeless Priest said, 'that was just the very first night of your association with my *very own* windfall mystery bargain boy.'

'I'm gratified that you're starting to take a possessive bent to the little cuss, Chains, because it only gets more colourful. I don't know quite how to put it. I've got kids that *enjoy* stealing. I've got kids that don't think about stealing one way or another, and I've got kids that just tolerate stealing because they know they've got nothing else to do. But nobody, and I mean *nobody*, has ever been hungry for it like this boy. If he had a bloody gash across his throat and a physiker was trying to sew it up, Lamora would steal the needle and thread and die laughing. He . . . steals *too much*.'

‘Steals too much,’ the Eyeless Priest mused. ‘Steals too much. Of all the complaints I never thought I’d hear from a man who trains little thieves for a living.’

‘Laugh now,’ the Thiefmaker said, ‘here’s the kicker.’

6

Months passed. Parthis became Festal became Aurim and the misty squalls of summer gave way to the harder, driving rains of winter. The Seventy-Seventh Year of Gandolo became the Seventy-Seventh year of Morgante, the City Father, Lord of Noose and Trowel.

Eight of the thirty-one Catchfire orphans, somewhat less than adept at the Thiefmaker’s *delicate* and *interesting* tasks, swung from the Black Bridge before the Palace of Patience. So it went; the survivors were too preoccupied with their own delicate and interesting tasks to care.

The society of Shades’ Hill, as Locke soon discovered, was firmly divided into two tribes, Streets and Windows. The latter was a smaller, more exclusive group that did all of its earning after sunset. They crept across roofs and down chimneys, picked locks and slid through barred embrasures, and would steal everything from coins and jewellery to blocks of lard in untended pantries.

The boys and girls of Streets, on the other hand, prowled Camorr’s alleys and cobbles and canal bridges by day, working in teams. Older and more experienced children (clutchers) worked at the actual pockets and purses and merchant stalls, while the younger and less capable (teasers) arranged distractions – crying for nonexistent mothers, or feigning illness, or rushing madly around crying ‘Stop! Thief!’ in every direction while the clutchers made off with their prizes.

Each orphan was shaken down by an older or larger child after returning to the graveyard from any visit outside; anything stolen or gathered was passed through the hierarchy of bruisers and bullies until it reached the Thiefmaker, who ticked off names

on an eerily accurate mental list as the day's catch came in. Those that produced got to eat; those that didn't got to practise twice as hard that evening.

Night after night the Thiefmaker would parade around the warrens of Shades' Hill laden down with money-pouches, silk handkerchiefs, necklaces, metal coat-buttons and a dozen other sorts of oddments that were worth clutching. His wards would strike at him from concealment or by feigned accident; those that he spotted or felt in the act were immediately punished. The Thiefmaker preferred not to beat the losers of these training games; rather, they were forced to drink from a flask of unalloyed ginger oil while their peers gathered round and chanted derisively. Camorri ginger oil is rough stuff, not entirely incomparable (as the Thiefmaker himself opined) to swallowing the smouldering ashes of Poison Oak.

Those that wouldn't open their mouths had it poured into their noses while older children held them upside-down. This never had to happen twice to anyone.

In time, even those with ginger-scalded tongues and swollen throats learned the rudiments of coat-teasing and 'borrowing' from the wares of unwary merchants. The Thiefmaker enthusiastically instructed them in the architecture of doublets, waistcoats, frock coats and belt-pouches, keeping up with all the latest fashions as they came off the docks; his wards learned what could be cut away, what could be torn away, and what must be teased out with deft fingers.

'The point, my loves, is not to hump the subject's leg like a dog or clutch their hand like a lost babe. Half a second of actual contact with the subject is often too long, too long by far.' The Thiefmaker mimed a noose going around his neck and let his tongue bulge out past his teeth. 'You will live or die by three sacred rules. First, always ensure that the subject is nicely distracted, either by your teasers or by some convenient bit of unrelated bum-fuckery, like a fight or a house fire. House fires are *marvellous* for our purposes; cherish them. Second, minimise, and I damn well mean *minimise*, contact with the subject even when they are distracted.' He released himself from his invisible noose and grinned slyly. 'Lastly, once you've done your business, clear the vicinity even if the subject is as dumb as a box of hammers. What did I teach you?'

‘Clutch once, then run,’ his students chanted. ‘Clutch twice, get hung!’

New orphans came in by ones and twos; older children seemed to leave the hill every few weeks with little ceremony. Locke presumed that this was evidence of some category of discipline well beyond ginger oil, but he never asked, as he was too low in the hill’s pecking order to risk it or trust the answers he would get.

As for his own training, Locke went to Streets the day after he arrived, and was immediately thrown in with the teasers (punitively, he suspected). By the end of his second month his skills had secured him elevation to the ranks of the clutchers. This was considered a step up in social status, but Lamora alone in the entire hill seemed to prefer working with the teasers long after he was entitled to stop.

He was sullen and friendless inside the hill, but at teasing he was a natural artist; it brought him to life. He perfected the use of over-chewed orange pulp as a substitute for vomit; where other teasers would simply clutch their stomachs and moan, Locke would season his performances by spewing a mouthful of warm white and orange slop at the feet of his intended audience (or, if he was in a particularly perverse mood, all over their dress-hems or leggings).

Another favourite device of his was a long dry twig concealed in one leg of his breeches and tied to his ankle. By rapidly going down to his knees he could snap this twig with an audible noise; this, followed by a piercing wail, was an effective magnet for attention and sympathy, especially in the immediate vicinity of a wagon wheel. When he’d teased the crowd long enough, he would be rescued from further attention by the arrival of several other teasers, who would loudly announce that they were ‘dragging him home to mother’ so he could see a physiker. His ability to walk would be miraculously recovered just as soon as he was hauled around a corner.

In fact, he worked up a repertoire of artful teases so rapidly that the Thieftmaker had cause to take him aside for a second private conversation (this after Locke arranged the inconvenient public collapse of a young lady’s skirt and bodice with a few swift strokes of a finger-knife).

‘Look here, Locke-after-your-father Lamora,’ the Thieftmaker said, ‘no ginger oil

this time, I assure you, but I would *greatly* prefer your teases to veer sharply from the entertaining and back to the practical.'

Locke merely stared up at him and shuffled his feet.

'I shall speak plainly, then. The other teasers are going out day after day to watch *you*, not to do their bloody jobs. I'm not feeding my own private theatre troupe. Get my crew of happy little jack-offs back to their own teasing, and quit being such a celebrity with your own.'

For a time after that, everything was serene.

Then, barely six months after he arrived at the hill, Locke accidentally burned down the Elderglass Vine tavern and precipitated a quarantine riot that very nearly wiped the Narrows from the map of Camorr.

The Narrows was a valley of warrens and hovels at the northernmost tip of the bad part of the city; kidney-shaped and something like a vast amphitheatre, the island's heart was forty-odd feet beneath its outer edges. Leaning rows of tenement houses and windowless shops jutted from the tiers of this great seething bowl; wall collapsed against wall and alley folded upon mist-silvered alley so that no level of the Narrows could be traversed by more than two men walking abreast.

The Elderglass Vine crouched over the cobblestones of the road that passed west and crossed, via a stone bridge, from the Narrows into the green depths of the Mara Camorrazza. It was a sagging three-storey beast of weather-warped wood, with rickety stairs inside and out that maimed at least a patron a week (indeed, there was a lively pool going as to which of the regulars would be the next to crack his skull). It was a haunt of pipe-smokers and Gaze addicts, who would squeeze the precious drops of their drug onto their eyeballs in public, and lie there shuddering with visions while strangers went through their belongings or used them as tables.

The Seventy-Seventh Year of Morgante had just arrived when Locke Lamora burst into the common room of the Elderglass Vine, sobbing and sniffing with gusto, his face showing the red cheeks, bleeding lips and bruised eyes that were characteristic

of Black Whisper.

‘Please, sir,’ he whispered to a horrified bouncer while dice-throwers, bartenders, whores and thieves stopped to stare. ‘Please. Mother and Father are sick; I don’t know what’s wrong with them. I’m the only one who can move – you must,’ – sniff – ‘help! Please, sir . . .’

At least, that’s what would have been heard had the bouncer not triggered a headlong exodus from the Elderglass Vine by screaming ‘Whisper! Black Whisper!’ at the top of his lungs. No boy of Locke’s size could have survived the ensuing orgy of shoving and panic had not the badge of illness on his face been better than any shield. Dice clattered to tabletops and cards fluttered down like falling leaves; tin mugs and tarred leather ale-jacks splattered cheap liquor as they hit the floor. Tables were overturned, knives and clubs were pulled to prod others into flight, and Gazers were trampled as an undisciplined wave of human detritus surged out every door save that in which Locke stood, pleading uselessly (or so it seemed) to screams and turned backs.

When the tavern had cleared of everyone but a few moaning (or motionless) Gazers, Locke’s companions stole in behind him: a dozen of the fastest teasers and clutchers in Streets, specially invited by Lamora for this expedition. They spread out among the fallen tables and behind the battered bar, plucking wildly at anything valuable. Here a handful of discarded coins, here a good knife, here a set of whalebone dice with tiny garnet chips for markers. From the pantry, baskets of coarse but serviceable bread and salted butter in grease-paper, and a dozen bottles of wine. Half a minute was all Locke allowed them, counting in his head while he rubbed his make-up from his face; by the end of the count, he motioned his associates back out into the night.

Riot drums were already beating to summon the watch, and above their rhythm could be heard the first faint flutings of pipes, the bone-chilling sound that called out the Duke’s ghouls – the Quarantine Guard.

The participants in Locke’s smash-and-grab adventure threaded their way through the growing crowds of confused and panicked Narrows-dwellers, and scuttled home indirectly through the Mara Camorazza or the Coalsmoke district.

They returned with the largest haul of goods and food in the memory of the Shades' Hill orphans, and a larger pile of copper half-barons than Locke had hoped for (he hadn't known that men who played at dice or cards kept money out in plain view, for in Shades' Hill such games were the exclusive domain of the oldest and most popular orphans, and he was neither).

For a few hours, the Thiefmaker was merely bemused.

That night, panicked drunks set fire to the Elderglass Vine, and hundreds tried to flee the Narrows when the city watch was unable to locate the boy who'd first triggered the panic. Riot-drums beat until dawn, bridges were blocked, and Duke Nicovante's archers took to the canals around the Narrows in flat-bottomed boats, with arrows to last all night and then some.

The next morning found the Thiefmaker once again in private conversation with his littlest plague orphan.

'The problem with you, Locke-*fucking*-Lamora, is that you are not *circumspect*. Do you know what *circumspect* means?'

Locke shook his head.

'Let me put it like this. That tavern had an owner. That owner worked for Capa Barsavi, the big man himself, just like I do. Now, that tavern-owner paid the Capa, just like I do, to avoid *accidents*. Thanks to you, he's had one hell of an accident, even though he was paying his money and didn't have an accident forthcoming. So, if you follow me, inciting a pack of drunk fucking animals to burn that place to the ground with a fake plague scare was the opposite of a *circumspect* means of operation. So now can you venture a guess as to what the word means?'

Locke knew a good time to nod vigorously when he heard it.

'Unlike the last time you tried to send me to an early grave, this one I can't buy my way out of, and thank the gods I don't need to, because the mess is huge. The yellowjackets clubbed down two hundred people last night before they all figured out that nobody had the Whisper; the Duke called out his fucking regulars and was about to give the Narrows a good scrubbing with fire-oil. Now, the only reason, and I mean the

only reason, that you're not floating in a shark's stomach with a very surprised expression on your face is that the Elderglass Vine is just a pile of ashes; nobody knows anything was stolen from it *before* it became that pile of ashes. Nobody except us.

'So, we're *all* going to agree that nobody in this hill knows anything about what happened, and *you* are going to re-learn some of that reticence I talked about when you first arrived here. You remember reticence, right?

Locke nodded.

'I just want little things from you, Lamora. I want nice, neat little jobs. I want a purse here, a sausage there. I want you to swallow your ambition, shit it out like a bad meal, and be a *circumspect* little teaser for about the next million years. Can you do that for me? Don't rob any more yellowjackets, don't burn any more taverns, don't start any more fucking riots. Just pretend to be a coarse-witted little cutpurse like your brothers and sisters. Clear?'

Again, Locke nodded, doing his best to look rueful.

'Good. And now,' the Thiefmaker said as he produced his nearly full flask of ginger oil, 'we're going to engage in some, ahhh, *reinforcement* of my admonishments.'

And, for a time (once Locke recovered his powers of speech and unlabored breathing), everything was serene.

But the Seventy-Seventh Year of Morgante became the Seventy-Seventh Year of Sendovani, and though Locke succeeded in hiding his actions from the Thiefmaker for a time, on one more specific occasion he failed spectacularly to be circumspect.

When the Thiefmaker realised what the boy had done, he went to see the Capa of Camorr and secured permission for one little death. Only as an afterthought did he go to see the Eyeless Priest, intent not on mercy but on one last chance for a slim profit.

The sky was a fading red and nothing remained of the day save for a line of molten gold slowly lowering on the western horizon. Locke Lamora trailed in the long shadow of the Thiefmaker, who was leading him to the Temple of Perelandro to be sold. At long last Locke had discovered where the older children had been disappearing to.

A great glass arch led from the north-west base of Shades' Hill to the eastern edge of the long, vast Temple District. At the apex of this bridge the Thiefmaker paused and stared, north, across the lightless houses of the Quiet, across the mist-wreathed waters of the rushing Angevine, to the shaded manors and tree-lined white stone boulevards of the Alcegrante islands, laid out in opulence beneath the impossible height of the Five Towers.

The Five were the most prominent Elderglass structures in a city thick with the arcane substance; the smallest and least magnificent, Dawncatcher, was a mere eighty feet wide and four hundred feet tall. The true colour of each smooth tower was mingled now with the sinking furnace-light of sunset, and the weblike net of cables and cargo baskets that threaded the tower tops was barely visible against the carmine sky.

'We'll wait here a moment, boy,' said the Thiefmaker with uncharacteristic wistfulness in his voice. 'Here on my bridge. So few come to Shades' Hill this way, it might as well be mine.'

The Duke's Wind that blew in from the Iron Sea by day had turned; the night, as always, would be ruled by the muggy Hangman's Wind that blew from land to sea, thick with the scents of farm fields and rotting marshes.

'I'm getting rid of you, you know.' The Thiefmaker added after a moment, 'Not, ahhh, fooling. Goodbye, forever. It's a pity you're missing something . . . common sense, perhaps.'

Locke said nothing, instead staring up at the vast glass towers as the sky behind them drained of colour; the blue-white stars brightened and the last rays of the sun vanished in the west like a great eye closing.

As the first hint of true darkness seemed to fall over the city a new light rose faint and glimmering to push it back; this light gleamed within the Elderglass of the Five

Towers themselves, and within the translucent glass of the bridge on which they were standing. It waxed with every passing breath, gaining strength until it bathed the city with the fey half-light of an overcast day.

The hour of Falselight had come.

From the heights of the Five Towers to the obsidian smoothness of the vast glass breakwaters to the artificial reefs beneath the slate-coloured waves, Falselight radiated from every surface and every shard of Elderglass in Camorr, from every speck of the alien material left so long before by the creatures that had first shaped the city. Every night, as the west finally swallowed the sun, the glass bridges would become threads of firefly light; the glass towers and glass avenues and the strange glass sculpture-gardens would shimmer wanly with violet and azure and orange and pearl-white, and the moons and stars would fade to grey.

This was what passed for twilight in Camorr – the end of work for the last daylight laborers, the calling of the night-watches and the sealing of the landward gates; an hour of supernatural radiance that would soon enough give way to true night.

‘Let’s be about our business,’ the Thiefmaker said, and the two of them headed down into the Temple District, walking on soft alien light.

8

Falselight was the last hour during which the temples of Camorr traditionally remained open, and the Eyeless Priest at the House of Perelandro was wasting none of the time still left to fill the copper money-kettle sitting before him on the steps of his decrepit temple.

‘Orphans!’ He bellowed in a voice that would have been at home on a battlefield, ‘Are we not all orphaned, sooner or later? Alas for those torn from the mother’s bosom, barely past infancy!’

A pair of slender young boys, presumably orphans, were seated on either side of

the money-kettle, wearing hooded white robes. The eldritch glow of Falselight seemed to inflame the hollow blackness of their staring eyes as they watched men and women hurrying about their business on the squares and avenues of the gods.

‘Alas,’ the priest continued, ‘for those cast out by cruel fate to a wicked world that has no place for them, a world that has no use for them. Slaves is what it makes of them! Slaves, or worse, *playthings* for the lusts of the wicked and the ungodly, forcing them into half-lives of unspeakable degeneracy, beside which mere slavery would be a blessing!’

Locke marvelled, for he had never seen a stage performance or heard a trained orator. Here was scorn that could boil standing water from stone; here was remonstrance that made his pulse race with excited shame, though he was himself an orphan. He wanted to hear the big-voiced man yell at him some more.

So great was the fame of Father Chains, the Eyeless Priest, that even Locke Lamora had heard of him; a man of late-middle years with a chest as broad as a scrivener’s desk and a beard that clung to his craggy face like a pad of scrubbing wool. A thick white blindfold covered his forehead and his eyes, a white cotton vestment hung to his bare ankles and a pair of black iron manacles encircled his wrists. Heavy steel chains led from these manacles, back up the steps of the temple and through the open doors to the interior; Locke could see that as Father Chains gestured to his listeners, these chains were nearly taut. He was at the very limit of his freedom.

For thirteen years, popular lore had it, Father Chains had never set foot beyond the steps of his temple. As a measure of his devotion to Perelandro, Father of Mercies, Lord of the Overlooked, he had chained himself to the walls of his inner sanctuary with iron manacles that had neither locks nor keys, and paid a physiker to pluck out his eyes while a crowd watched.

‘The Lord of the Overlooked keeps vigil on every son and daughter of the dead, on that point I can assure you! Blessed in his eyes are those, unbound by the duties of blood, who render aid and comfort to the motherless and the fatherless . . .’

Though he was known to be blind as well as blindfolded, Locke could have

sworn that Father Chains' head turned toward himself and the Thiefmaker as they approached across the square.

'... out of the undoubted goodness of their hearts, they nourish and protect the children of Camorr; not with cold-souled avarice, but with selfless kindness! Truly blessed,' he hissed with fervour, 'are the protectors of Camorr's *gentle, needful* orphans.'

As the Thiefmaker reached the steps of the temple and started up, he was careful to slap his heels against the stones to announce his presence.

'Someone approaches,' Father Chains said, 'two someones, or so say my ears!'

'I've brought you the boy we discussed, Father,' the Thiefmaker announced loudly enough for several passersby to hear, should they be listening. 'I've prepared him as well as I could for the, ahhhh, tests of apprenticeship and initiation.'

The priest stumbled across the steps towards Locke, dragging his clattering chains behind him. The hooded boys guarding the money-kettle spared him a brief glance, but said nothing.

'Have you, then?' Father Chains' hand shot out with alarming accuracy and his calloused fingers spidered themselves over Locke's forehead, cheeks, nose and chin. 'A small boy, it seems, a very small boy. Though not without a certain measure of character, I venture, in the malnourished curves of his sad orphan's face.'

'His name,' said the Thiefmaker, 'is Locke Lamora, and I wager the Order of Perelandro will find many uses for his, ahhhh, unusual degree of personal initiative.'

'Better still,' the priest rumbled, 'that he were sincere, penitent, honest and inclined to discipline. But I have no doubt that his time in your affectionate care has instilled those qualities in him by example.' He clapped his hands together three times. 'My boys, our day's business is done; gather the offerings of the good people of Camorr, and let's show our prospective initiate into the temple.'

The Thiefmaker gave Locke a brief squeeze on the shoulder, then pushed him quite enthusiastically up the steps toward the Eyeless Priest. As the white-robed boys carried the jangling copper bowl past him, the Thiefmaker tossed a small leather purse into it, spread his arms wide and bowed with his characteristic serpentine theatricality.

The last Locke saw of him, he was moving rapidly across the Temple District with his crooked arms and bony shoulders rolling gaily; the strut of a man set free.

9

The sanctuary of the Temple of Perelandro was a musty stone chamber with several puddles of standing water; the mould-eaten tapestries on the walls were rapidly devolving into their component threads. It was lit only by the pastel glare of Falselight and the half-hearted efforts of a frosted white alchemical globe, perched precariously in a fixture just above the steel plate that chained the Eyeless Priest to the sanctuary wall. Locke saw a curtained doorway on the back wall, and nothing else.

‘Calo, Galdo,’ said Father Chains, ‘be good lads and see to the doors, will you?’

The two robed boys set down the copper kettle and moved to one of the tapestries. Working together, they swept it aside and pulled at a concealed device; some great mechanism creaked in the sanctuary walls, and the twin doors leading out to the temple steps began to draw inward. When they finished sliding together with the scrape of stone against stone, the alchemical globe suddenly flared into brighter luminescence.

‘Now,’ said the Eyeless Priest as he knelt, letting a great deal of slack chain gather in little steel mounds about him, ‘come over here, Locke Lamora, and let’s see if you have any of the gifts necessary to become an initiate of this temple.’

With Father Chains on his knees, Locke and he were roughly forehead to forehead. In response to Chains’ beckoning hands, Locke stepped close and waited. The priest wrinkled his nose.

‘I see that your former master remains less than fastidious about the pungency of his wards; no matter. That will soon be rectified. For now, simply give me your hands, like so.’ Chains firmly but gently guided Locke’s small hands until the boy’s palms rested over Chains’ blindfold. ‘Now . . . merely close your eyes and concentrate . . . concentrate. Let whatever virtuous thoughts you have within you bubble to the surface

– let the warmth of your generous spirit flow forth from your innocent hands . . . Ah, yes, like that . . .’

Locke was half-alarmed and half-amused, but the lines of Father Chains’ weathered face drew downward, and his mouth soon hung open in beatific anticipation.

‘Ahhhhhhh,’ the priest whispered, his voice thick with emotion, ‘yes, yes, you do have some talent . . . some power . . . I can feel it . . . It might almost be . . . a *miracle!*’

At that, Chains jerked his head back, and Locke jumped in the opposite direction. His chains clanking, the priest lifted manacled hands to his blindfold and yanked it off with a flourish. Locke recoiled, unsure of what eyeless sockets might look like, but the priest’s eyes were quite normal – in fact, Chains squinted in pain and rubbed them several times, wincing at the glare of the alchemical globe.

‘Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha!’ he cried, finally holding out his hands toward Locke, ‘I’m healed! I’m healed! I can *SEE ONCE MORE!*’

Locke stared, gaping like a slackwit for the second time that night, unsure of what to say. Behind him, the two hooded boys started to giggle, and Locke’s eyebrows bent inward in suspicion.

‘You’re not . . . really blind,’ he said.

‘And you’re clearly not stupid!’ Chains cried, leaping up with a glee that brought wet-sounding pops from his kneecaps. He waved his manacled hands like a bird trying to take flight. ‘Calo! Galdo! Get these damn things off my wrists so we can count our daily blessings!’

The two hooded boys hurried over and did something to the manacles that Locke couldn’t quite follow; they slid open and fell to the floor with a jarring clatter. Chains gingerly rubbed the skin that had been beneath them; it was as white as the meat of a fresh fish.

‘You’re not . . . really a priest!’ Locke added, while the older man caressed some colour back into his forearms.

‘Oh no,’ Chains said. ‘No, I am a priest. Just not a priest of, um, Perelandro. Nor are my initiates initiates of Perelandro. Nor will you be an initiate of Perelandro. Locke

Lamora, say hello to Calo and Galdo Sanza.'

The white-robed boys swept back their hoods and Locke saw that they were twins; perhaps a year or two older than himself, and far sturdier-looking. They had the olive skin and black hair of the true Camorri; their identical long, hook-ended noses, however, were something of an anomaly. Smiling, they joined hands and bowed in unison from the waist.

'Um, hi,' Locke said. 'Which of you is . . . which?'

'Today, I am Galdo,' said the one on Locke's left.

'Tomorrow, I will probably be Galdo,' said the other one.

'Or perhaps we'll both want to be Calo,' added the one that had first spoken.

'In time,' Father Chains interrupted, 'you'll learn to tell them apart by the number of dents I've kicked in their respective arses; one of them always manages to be ahead of the other, somehow.' He stood behind Locke and placed both of his wide, heavy hands on Locke's shoulders. 'Idiots, this is Locke Lamora. As you can see, I've just bought him from your old benefactor, the master of Shades' Hill.'

'We remember you,' said presumed-Galdo.

'A Catchfire orphan,' said presumed-Calo.

'Father Chains bought us just after you arrived,' they said in unison, grinning.

'Knock that bullshit off,' Father Chains said, his voice somehow regal. 'You two have just volunteered to cook dinner. Pears and sausage in oil, and a double portion for your new little brother. Get. Locke and I will deal with the kettle.'

Sneering and gesturing rudely as they went, the twins ran for the curtained door and vanished behind it. Locke could hear their footsteps trailing away down some sort of staircase, and then Father Chains motioned for him to sit beside the copper money-kettle.

'Sit, boy. Let's have a few words about what's going on here.' Chains eased himself back down to the damp floor, crossing his legs and settling a thoughtful stare on Locke. 'Your former master said you could do simple sums. Is this true?'

'Yes, master.'

‘Don’t call me “master”. Makes my balls shrivel and my teeth crack. Just call me Father Chains. And while you’re sitting there, let’s see you tip that kettle and count all the money in there.’

Locke tried to pull the kettle over on one side, straining, seeing now why Calo and Galdo preferred to share the burden. Chains gave the kettle a push on the base and its contents finally spilled out on the floor beside Locke. ‘Makes it much harder to snatch, having it weigh that much,’ Chains said.

‘How can you . . . how can you pretend to be a priest?’ Locke asked, while he sorted full copper coins and clipped copper bits into little piles. ‘Don’t you fear the gods? The wrath of Perelandro?’

‘Of course I do,’ Chains replied, running his fingers through his round, ragged beard. ‘I fear them very much. Like I said, I’m a priest, just not a priest of Perelandro. I’m an initiated servant of the Nameless Thirteenth, the Thiefwatcher, the Crooked Warden, the Benefactor, Father of Necessary Pretexts.’

‘But . . . there are only the Twelve.’

‘It’s funny just how many people are sadly misinformed on that point, my dear boy. Imagine, if you will, that the Twelve *happen* to have something of a black-sheep younger brother, whose exclusive dominion *happens* to be thieves like you and I. Though the Twelve won’t allow his Name to be spoken or heard, they have some lingering affection for his merry brand of fuckery. Thus, crooked old posers such as myself aren’t blasted with lightning or pecked apart by crows for squatting in the temple of a more respectable god like Perelandro.’

‘You’re a priest of this . . . Thirteenth?’

‘Indeed. A priest of thieves, and a thieving priest. As Calo and Galdo will be, some day, and as you might be, provided you’re worth even the pittance I paid for you.’

‘But . . .’ Locke reached out and plucked the Thiefmaker’s purse (a pouch of rust-red leather) from the piles of copper and passed it to Chains. ‘If you paid for me, why did my old master leave an offering?’

‘Ah. Rest assured that I *did* pay for you, and you were cheap, and this is no

offering.’ Chains untied the little pouch and let its contents drop into his hand – a single white shark’s tooth, as long as Locke’s thumb. Chains waved it at the boy. ‘Have you ever seen one of these before?’

‘No . . . What is it?’

‘It’s a death-mark. The tooth of the wolf shark is the personal sigil of Capa Barsavi – your former master’s boss. My boss and your boss, for that matter. It means that you’re such a *sullen, thick-skulled little fuck-up* that your former master actually went to the Capa and got permission to kill you.’

Chains grinned, as though he were imparting nothing more than a ribald joke. Locke shivered.

‘Does that give you a moment of pause, my boy? Good. Stare at this thing, Locke. Take a good, hard look. It means your death is paid for. I bought this from your former master when I got you at a bargain price. It means that if Duke Nicovante himself adopted you tomorrow and proclaimed you his heir, I could still crack your skull open and nail you to a post, and nobody in the city would lift a fucking finger.’

Chains deftly shoved the tooth back into the red pouch, then hung it around Locke’s neck by its slender cord. ‘You’re going to wear that,’ the older man said, ‘until I deem you worthy to remove it, or until I make use of the power it gives me and . . . so!’ He slashed two fingers across the air in front of Locke’s throat. ‘Hide it under your clothes, and keep it next to your skin at all times to remind you just how close, how *very* close, you came to getting your throat slit tonight. If your former master were one shade less greedy than he is vindictive, I don’t doubt you’d be floating in the bay.’

‘What did I do?’

Chains did something with his eyes that made the boy feel smaller just for having tried to protest; Locke squirmed and fiddled with the death-mark pouch.

‘Please, boy. Let’s not start out with either of us insulting the other’s intelligence. There are only three people in life you can never fool – pawnbrokers, whores, and your mother. Since your mother’s dead, I’ve taken her place. Hence, I’m bullshit-proof.’ Chains’ voice grew serious. ‘You know perfectly well why your former master would

have cause to be displeased with you.'

'He said I wasn't . . . circumspect.'

'Circumspect,' Chains repeated. 'That's a good word. And no, you're not. He told me everything.'

Locke looked up from his little piles of coins, his eyes wide and near-watering. 'Everything?'

'Quite. Everything.' Chains stared the boy down for a long, difficult moment, then sighed. 'What did the good citizens of Camorr give to the cause of Perelandro today?'

'Twenty-seven copper barons, I think.'

'Hmmm. Just over four silver solons, then. A slow day. But it beats every other form of theft I ever met.'

'You steal this money from Perelandro too?'

'Of course I do, boy. I mentioned that I was a thief, didn't I? Not the sort of thief you're used to. Better. The entire city of Camorr is full of idiots running round and getting hung, all because they think that stealing is something you do with your *hands*.' Father Chains spat.

'Um . . . what do you steal with, Father Chains?'

The bearded priest tapped two fingers against the side of his head, then grinned widely and tapped his fingers against his teeth. 'Brains and a big mouth, my boy, brains and a big mouth. I planted my arse here thirteen years ago and the pious suckers of Camorr have been feeding me coins ever since. Plus I'm famous from Emberlain to Tal Verrar, but mostly I'm in it for the cold coinage.'

'Isn't it uncomfortable?' Locke asked, looking around at the sad innards of the temple. 'Living here, never going out?'

'This shabby little back-stage is no more the full extent of my temple than your old home was really a graveyard.' Chains chuckled. 'We're a different sort of thief here, Lamora. Deception and misdirection are our tools; we don't believe in hard work when a false face and a good line of bullshit can do so much more.'

'Then . . . you're like . . . teasers.'

'Perhaps, in the sense that a barrel of fire-oil is akin to a pinch of red pepper. And that's why I paid for you, my boy, though you lack the good sense the gods gave a carrot. You lie like a floor-tapestry. You're more crooked than an acrobat's spine. I could really make something of you, if I decided I could trust you.'

His searching eyes rested once more on Locke, and the boy guessed that he was supposed to say something.

'I'd like that,' he whispered. 'What do I do?'

'You can start by talking. I want to hear about what you did at Shades' Hill; the shit you pulled to get your former master angry at you.'

'But . . . you said you already knew everything.'

'I do. But I want to hear it from you, plain and clear, and I want it right the first time, with no backtracking or parts left out. If you try to conceal anything that I know you should be mentioning, I'll have no choice but to consider you a worthless waste of my trust – and you're already wearing my response around your neck.'

'Where,' Locke asked with only a slight catch in his voice, 'do I start?'

'We can begin with your most recent transgressions. There's one law that the brothers and sisters of Shades' Hill must never break, but your former master told me that you broke it twice and thought you were clever enough to get away with it.'

Locke's cheeks turned bright red, and he stared down at his fingers.

'Tell me, Locke. The Thiefmaker said you arranged the murders of two other Shades' Hill boys, and that he didn't pick up on your involvement until the second was already done.' Chains steepled his fingers before his face and gazed calmly at the boy with the death-mark around his neck. 'I want to know why you killed them, and I want to know how you killed them, and I want to hear it from your own lips. *Right now.*'