

PROLOGUE
The Minder

I

Place ten dozen hungry orphan thieves in a dank burrow of vaults and tunnels beneath what used to be a graveyard, put them under the supervision of one partly crippled old man, and you will soon find that governing them becomes a delicate business.

The Thieftmaker, skulking eminence of the orphan kingdom beneath Shades' Hill in old Camorr, was not yet so decrepit that any of his grimy little wards could hope to stand alone against him. Nonetheless, he was alert to the doom that lurked in the clutching hands and wolfish impulses of a mob – a mob that he, through his training, was striving to make more predatory still with each passing day. The veneer of order that his life depended on was insubstantial as damp paper at the best of times.

His presence itself could enforce absolute obedience in a certain radius, of course. Wherever his voice could carry and his own senses seize upon misbehaviour, his orphans were tame. But to keep his ragged company in line when he was drunk or asleep or hobbling around the city on business, it was essential that he make them eager partners in their own subjugation.

He moulded most of the biggest, oldest boys and girls in Shades' Hill into a sort of honour guard, granting them shoddy privileges and stray scraps of near-respect. More importantly, he worked hard to keep every single one of them in constant deadly terror of himself. No failure was ever met with anything but pain or the promise of pain, and the seriously insubordinate had a way of vanishing. Nobody had any illusions that they had gone to a better place.

So he ensured that his chosen few, steeped in fear, had no outlet save to vent their frustrations (and thus enforce equivalent fear) upon the next oldest and largest set of children. These in turn would oppress the next weakest class of victim. Step by step the misery was shared out, and the Thieftmaker's authority would cascade like a geological

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pressure out to the meekest edges of his orphan mass.

It was an admirable system, considered in itself, unless of course you happened to be part of that outer edge – the small, the eccentric, the friendless. In their case, life in Shades' Hill was like a boot to the face at every hour of every day.

Locke Lamora was five or six or seven years old. Nobody knew for certain, or cared to know. He was unusually small, undeniably eccentric, and perpetually friendless. Even when he shuffled along inside a great smelly mass of orphans, one among dozens, he walked alone and he damn well knew it.

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Meeting time. A bad time under the Hill. The shifting stream of orphans surrounded Locke like an unfamiliar forest, concealing trouble everywhere.

The first rule to surviving in this state was to avoid attention. As the murmuring army of orphans headed toward the great vault at the centre of Shades' Hill, where the Thieftmaker had called them, Locke flicked his glance left and right. The trick was to spot known bullies at a safe distance without making actual eye contact (nothing worse, the mistake of mistakes) and then, ever so casually, move to place neutral children between himself and each threat until it passed.

The second rule was to avoid responding when the first rule proved insufficient, as it too often did.

The crowd parted behind him. Like all prey animals, Locke had a honed instinct for approaching harm. He had enough time to wince preemptively, and then came the blow, sharp and hard, right between his shoulder blades. Locke smacked into the tunnel wall and barely managed to stay on his feet.

Familiar laughter followed the blow. It was Gregor Foss, years older and two stone heavier, as far beyond Locke's powers of reprisal as the duke of Camorr.

'Gods, Lamora, what a weak and clumsy little cuss you are.' Gregor put a hand on the back of Locke's head and pushed him along, still in full contact with the moist dirt wall, until his forehead bounced painfully off one of the old wooden tunnel supports. 'Got no strength to stay on your own feet. Hell, if you tried to bugger a cockroach, the roach'd spin you round and do you up the ass instead.'

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Everyone nearby laughed, a few from genuine amusement, the rest from fear of being seen not laughing. Locke kept stumbling forward, seething but silent, as though it were a perfectly natural state of affairs to have a face covered with dirt and a throbbing bump on the forehead. Gregor shoved him once more, but without vigour, then snorted and pushed ahead through the crowd.

Play dead. Pretend not to care. That was the way to keep a few moments of humiliation from becoming hours or days of pain; to keep bruises from becoming broken bones or worse.

The river of orphans was flowing to a rare grand gathering, nearly all the Hill, and in the main vault the air was already heavier and staler than usual. The Thiefmaker sat in his high-backed chair, his head barely visible above the press of children, while his oldest subjects carved paths through the crowd to take their accustomed places near him. Locke sought a far wall and pressed up against it, doing his best impression of a shadow. There, with the welcome comfort of a guarded back, he touched his forehead and indulged in a momentary pout. His fingers were slippery with blood when he took them away.

After a few moments, the influx of orphans trickled to a halt, and the Thiefmaker cleared his throat.

It was a Penance Day in the seventy-seventh Year of Sendovani, a hanging day, and outside the dingy caves below Shades' Hill the duke of Camorr's people were knotting nooses under a bright spring sky.

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'It's a lamentable business,' said the Thiefmaker. 'That's what it is. To have some of our own brothers and sisters snatched into the unforgiving arms of the duke's justice. Damned deplorable that they were slackards enough to get caught! Alas. As I have always been at pains to remind you, loves, ours is a delicate trade, not at all appreciated by those we practise upon.'

Locke wiped the dirt from his face. It was likely that his tunic sleeve deposited more grime than it removed, but the ritual of putting himself in order was calming. While he tended to himself the master of the Hill spoke on.

'Sad day, my loves, a proper tragedy. But when the milk's gone bad you might as well look forward to cheese, hmm? Oh yes! Opportunity!

It's unseasonal fine hanging weather out there. That means crowds with spending purses, and their eyes are going to be fixed on the *spectacle*, aren't they?

With two crooked fingers (broken of old, and badly healed) he did a pantomime of a man stepping off an edge and plunging forward. At the end of the plunge the fingers kicked spasmodically and some of the older children giggled. Someone in the middle of the orphan army sobbed, but the Thieftmaker paid them no heed.

'You're all going out to watch the hangings in groups,' he said. 'Let this put fear into your hearts, loves! Indiscretion, clumsiness, want of confidence – today you'll see their only possible reward. To live the life the gods have given you, you must clutch wisely, then run. Run like the hounds of hell on a sinner's scent! That's how we dodge the noose. Today you'll have a last look at some friends who could not.

'And before you return,' he said, lowering his voice, 'each of you will do them one better. Fetch back a nice bit of coin or flash, at all hazards. Empty hands get empty bellies.'

'Has we gots to?'

The voice was a desperate whine. Locke identified the source as Tam, a fresh catch, a lowest-of-the-low teaser who'd barely begun to learn the Shades' Hill life. He must have been the one sobbing, too.

'Tam, my lamb, you *gots* to do nothing,' said the Thieftmaker in a voice like mouldy velvet. He reached out and sifted through the crowd of orphans, parting them like dirty stalks of wheat until his hand rested on Tam's shaven scalp. 'But then, neither do I if you don't work, right? By all means, remove yourself from this grand excursion. A limitless supply of cold graveyard dirt awaits you for supper.'

'But ... can't I, like, do something else?'

'Why, you could polish my good silver tea service, if only I had one.' The Thieftmaker knelt, vanishing briefly from Locke's sight. 'Tam, this is the job I got, so it's the job you're gonna do, right? Good lad. Stout lad. Why the little rivers from the eyes? Is it just 'cause there's the hangings involved?'

'They – they was our friends.'

'Which means only—'

'Tam, you little piss-rag, stuff your whining up your stupid ass!'

The Thieftmaker whirled, and the new speaker recoiled from a slap to the side of his head. There was a ripple in the close-packed orphans

as the unfortunate target stumbled backward and was returned to his feet by shoves from his tittering friends. Locke couldn't suppress a smile. It always warmed his heart to see a bullying oldster knocked around.

'Veslin,' said the Thieftmaker with dangerous good cheer, 'do you enjoy being interrupted?'

'N-no ... no, sir.'

'How pleased I am to find us of a like mind on the subject.'

'Of ... course. Apologies, sir.'

The Thieftmaker's eyes returned to Tam, and his smile, which had evaporated like steam in sunlight a moment before, leapt back into place.

'As I was saying about our friends, our lamented friends. It's a shame. But isn't it a grand show they're putting on for us as they dangle? A ripe plum of a crowd they're summoning up? What sort of friends would we be if we refused to work such an opportunity? Good ones? Bold ones?'

'No, sir,' mumbled Tam.

'Indeed. Neither good nor bold. So we're going to seize this chance, right? And we're going to do them the honour of not looking away when they drop, aren't we?'

'If ... if you say so, sir.'

'I do say so.' The Thieftmaker gave Tam a perfunctory pat on the shoulder. 'Get to it. Drops start at high noon; the Masters of the Ropes are the only punctual creatures in this bloody city. Be late to your places and you'll have to work ten times as hard, I promise you. Minders! Call your teasers and clutchers. Keep our fresher brothers and sisters on short leashes.'

As the orphans dispersed and the older children called the names of their assigned partners and subordinates, the Thieftmaker dragged Veslin over to one of the enclosure's dirt walls for a private word.

Locke snickered, and wondered who he'd be partnered with for the day's adventure. Outside the Hill there were pockets to be picked, tricks to be played, bold larceny to be done. Though he realized his sheer enthusiasm for theft was part of what had made him a curiosity and an outcast, he had no more self-restraint in that regard than he had wings on his back.

This half-life of abuse beneath Shades' Hill was just something he had to endure between those bright moments when he could be at

work, heart pounding, running fast and hard for safety with someone else's valuables clutched in his hands. As far as his five or six or seven years had taught him, ripping people off was the greatest feeling in the whole world, and the only real freedom he had.

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'Think you can improve upon my leadership now, boy?' Despite his limited grip, the Thiefmaker still had the arms of a grown man, and he pinned Veslin against the dirt wall like a carpenter about to nail up a decoration. 'Think I need your wit and wisdom when I'm talking out loud?'

'No, your honour! Forgive me!'

'Veslin, jewel, don't I always?' With a falsely casual gesture, the Thiefmaker brushed aside one lapel of his threadbare coat and revealed the handle of the butcher's cleaver he kept hanging from his belt. The faintest hint of blade gleamed in the darkness behind it. 'I forgive. I remind. Are you reminded, boy? *Most thoroughly* reminded?'

'Indeed, sir, yes. Please ...'

'Marvellous.' The Thiefmaker released Veslin, and allowed his coat to fall over his weapon once again. 'What a happy conclusion for us both, then.'

'Thank you, sir. Sorry. It's just ... Tam's been whining all godsdamned morning. He's never seen anyone get the rope.'

'Once upon a time it was new to us all,' sighed the Thiefmaker. 'Let the boy cry, so long as he plucks a purse. If he won't, hunger's a marvellous instructor. Still, I'm putting him and a couple of other problems into a group for special oversight.'

'Problems?'

'Tam, for his delicacy. And No-Teeth.'

'Gods,' said Veslin.

'Yes, yes, the speck-brained little turd is so dim he couldn't shit in his hands if they were stitched to his asshole. Nonetheless, him. Tam. And one more.'

The Thiefmaker cast a significant glance at a far corner, where a sullen little boy leaned with his arms folded across his chest, watching other orphans form their assigned packs.

'Lamora,' whispered Veslin.

'Special oversight.' The Thiefmaker chewed nervously at the nails

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of his left hand. ‘There’s good money to be squeezed out of that one, if he’s got someone keeping him sensible and discreet.’

‘He nearly burnt up half the bloody city, sir.’

‘Only the Narrows, which mightn’t have been missed. And he took hard punishment for that without a flinch. I consider the matter closed. What he needs is a responsible sort to keep him in check.’

Veslin was unable to conceal his expression of disgust, and the Thiefmaker smirked.

‘Not you, lad. I need you and your little ape Gregor on distraction detail. Someone else gets made, you cover for ’em. And get back to me straightaway if anyone gets taken.’

‘Grateful, sir, very grateful.’

‘You should be. Sobbing Tam ... witless No-Teeth ... and one of hell’s own devils in knee-breeches. I need a bright candle to watch that crew. Go wake me up one of the Windows bunch.’

‘Oh.’ Veslin bit his cheek. The Windows crew, so-called because they specialized in traditional burglary, were the true elite among the orphans of Shades’ Hill. They were spared most chores, habitually worked in darkness, and were allowed to sleep well past noon. ‘They won’t like that.’

‘I don’t give a damn what they like. They don’t have a job this evening anyway. Get me a sharp one.’ The Thiefmaker spat out a gnawed crescent of dirty fingernail and wiped his fingers on his coat. ‘Hell, fetch me Sabetha.’

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‘Lamora!’

The summons came at last, and from the Thiefmaker himself. Locke padded warily across the dirt floor to where the master of the Hill sat whispering instructions to a taller child whose back was turned to Locke.

Waiting before the Thiefmaker were two other boys. One was Tam. The other was No-Teeth, a hapless twit whose beatings at the hands of older children had eventually given him his nickname. A sense of foreboding scuttled into Locke’s gut.

‘Here we are, then,’ said the Thiefmaker. ‘Three bold and likely lads. You’ll be working together on a special detail, under special authority. Meet your minder.’

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The taller child turned.

She was dirty, as they all were, and though it was hard to tell by the pale silver light of the vault's alchemical lanterns, she looked a little tired. She wore scuffed brown breeches, a long baggy tunic that at some distant remove had been white, and a leather flat cap over a tight kerchief, so that not a strand of her hair was visible.

Yet she was undeniably a *she*. For the first time in Locke's life some unpractised animal sense crept dimly to life to alert him to this fact. The Hill was full of girls, but never before had Locke dwelt on the thought of *a* girl. He sucked in a breath and realized that he could feel a nervous tingling at the tips of his fingers.

She had the advantage of at least a year and a good half-foot on him, and even tired she had that unfeigned natural poise which, in certain girls, makes young boys feel like something on the order of an insect beneath a heel. Locke had neither the eloquence nor the experience to grapple with the situation in anything resembling those terms. All he knew was that near her, of all the girls he'd seen in Shades' Hill, he felt touched by something mysterious and much vaster than himself.

He felt like jumping up and down. He felt like throwing up.

Suddenly he resented the presence of Tam and No-Teeth, resented the implication of the word 'minder,' and yearned to be doing something, anything, to impress this girl. His cheeks burned at the thought of how the bump on his forehead must look, and at being teamed up with two useless, sobbing clods.

'This is Beth,' said the Thiefmaker. 'She's got your keeping today, lads. Take what she says as though it came from me. Steady hands, level heads. No slacking and no gods-damned capers. Last thing we need is you getting *ambitious*.' It was impossible to miss the icy glance the Thiefmaker spared for Locke as he uttered this last part.

'Thank you very much, sir,' said Beth with nothing resembling actual gratitude. She pushed Tam and No-Teeth toward one of the vault exits. 'You two, wait at the entrance. I need to have a private word with your friend here.'

Locke was startled. A word with him? Had she guessed that he knew his way around clutching and teasing, that he was nothing like the other two? Beth glanced around, then put her hands on his shoulders and knelt. Some nervous animal in Locke's guts turned somersaults as her gaze came level with his. The old compunction about refusing eye

contact was not merely set aside, but vaporized from his mind.

Two things happened then.

First, he fell in love – though it would be years before he realized what the feeling was called and how thoroughly it was going to complicate his life.

Second, *she* spoke directly to him for the first time, and he would remember her words with a clarity that would jar his heart long after the other incidents of that time had faded to a haze of half-truths in his memory:

‘You’re the Lamora boy, right?’

He nodded eagerly.

‘Well, look here, you little shit. I’ve heard all about you, so just shut your mouth and keep those reckless hands in your pockets. I swear to all the gods, if you give me one hint of trouble, I will heave you off a bridge and it will *look* like a bloody accident.’

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It was an unwelcome thing, to suddenly feel half an inch tall.

Locke dazedly followed Beth, Tam, and No-Teeth out of the darkness of the Shades’ Hill vaults and into the late-morning sunshine. His eyes stung, and the daylight was only part of it. What had he done (and who had told her about it?) to earn the scorn of the one person he now wanted to impress more than any other in the world?

Pondering, his thoughts wandered uneasily to his surroundings. Out here in the ever-changing open there was so much to see, so much to hear. His survival instincts gradually took hold. The back of his mind was all for Beth, but he forced his eyes to the present situation.

Camorr today was bright and busy, making the most of its reprieve from the hard grey rains of spring. Windows were thrown open. The more prosperous crowds had moulted, shedding their oilcloaks and cowls in favour of summery dress. The poor stayed wrapped in the same reek-soaked dross they wore in all seasons. Like the Shades’ Hill crowd, they had to keep their clothes on their backs or risk losing them to rag-pickers.

As the four orphans crossed the canal bridge from Shades’ Hill to the Narrows (it was a source of mingled pride and incredulity to Locke that the Thieftmaker was so convinced that one little scheme of his could have burnt this *whole* neighbourhood down), Locke saw at least

three boats of corpse-fishers using hooks to pluck bloated bodies from under wharves and dock pilings. Those would sometimes go ignored for days in cool, foul weather.

Beth led the three boys through the Narrows, dodging up stone stairs and across rickety wooden foot-bridges, avoiding the most cramped and twisted alleys where drunks, stray dogs, and less obvious dangers were sure to lurk. Tam and Locke stayed right behind her, but No-Teeth was constantly veering off or slowing down. By the time they left the Narrows and crossed to the overgrown garden passages of the Mara Camorrazza, the city's ancient strolling park, Beth was dragging No-Teeth by his collar.

'Damn your pimple of a brain,' she said. 'Keep to my heels and quit making trouble!'

'Not making trouble,' muttered No-Teeth.

'You want to cock this up and go hungry tonight? You want to give some brute like Veslin an excuse to pry out any teeth he hasn't got to yet?'

'Nooooooo.' No-Teeth stretched the word out with a bored yawn, looked around as though noticing the world for the first time, then jerked free of Beth's grip. 'I want to wear your hat,' he said, pointing at her leather cap.

Locke swallowed nervously. He'd seen No-Teeth pitch these sudden, unreasonable fits before. There was something not quite right in the boy's head. He frequently suffered for calling attention to himself inside the Hill, where distinctiveness without strength meant pain.

'You can't,' said Beth. 'Mind yourself.'

'I want to. I want to!' No-Teeth actually stomped the ground and balled his fists. 'I promise I'll behave. Give me your hat!'

'You'll behave because I say so!'

No-Teeth's response was to lunge and snatch the leather cap off Beth's head. He yanked it so hard that her kerchief came as well, and an untidy spray of reddish-brown curls tumbled to her shoulders. Locke's jaw fell.

There was something so indefinably lovely, so *right*, about seeing that hair free in the sunlight that he momentarily forgot that his enchantment was expressly one-way, and that this was anything but convenient for their task. As Locke stared he noticed that only the lower portion of her hair was actually brown. Above the ears it was rusty red.

She'd had it coloured once, and it had grown out since.

Beth was even faster than No-Teeth once her shock wore off, and before he could do anything with her cap it was back in her hands. She slapped him viciously across the face with it.

'Ow!'

Not placated, she hit him again, and he cringed backward. Locke recovered his wits and assumed the vacant expression used inside the Hill by the uninvolved when someone nearby was getting thrashed.

'Stop! Stop!' No-Teeth sobbed.

'If you *ever* touch this cap again,' Beth whispered, shaking him by his collar, 'I swear to Aza Guilla who numbers the dead that I will deliver you straight to her. You *stupid* little ass!'

'I promise! I promise!'

She released him with a scowl, and with a few deft movements made her red curls vanish again beneath the tightly drawn kerchief. When the leather cap came down to seal them in, Locke felt a pang of disappointment.

'You're lucky nobody else saw,' said Beth, shoving No-Teeth forward. 'Gods love you, you little slug, you're just lucky nobody else saw. Quick, now. At my heel, you two.'

Locke and Tam followed her without a word, as close as nervous ducklings fixed on a mother's tail feathers.

Locke shook with excitement. He'd been horrified at the incompetence of his assigned partners, but now he wondered if their problems could do anything but make him look better in Beth's eyes. Oh yes. Let them whine, let them throw fits, let them go home with nothing in their hands. Hell, let them tip off the city watch and get chased through the streets to the sounds of whistles and baying dogs. She'd have to prefer anything to that, including him.

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They emerged at last from the Mara Camorrazza into a whirl of noise and confusion.

It was indeed unseasonably fine hanging weather, and the normally dreary neighbourhood around the Old Citadel, the duke's seat of justice, bustled like a carnival. Common folk were thick on the cobblestones, while here and there the carriages of the wealthy rattled through the mess with hired guards trotting alongside passing out