

The Lies of Locke Lamora

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PROLOGUE

The boy who stole too much

I

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 Vadrans 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker, '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 Thieftmaker'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 Thieftmaker'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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker'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 Thieftmaker, 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, towards 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.

3

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.'

4

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 Thieftmaker; 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 odour the Catchfire orphans soon multiplied with their own presence.

'In! In!' cried the Thieftmaker, 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 Thieftmaker'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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker and his minions. The Thieftmaker 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 Thiefmaker 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 asshole. 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker. 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 Thieftmaker jerked back as though an asp had just sunk its fangs into his hand, 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 Thieftmaker whispered. 'Oh, gods. You may have just fucked us all superbly, Locke-after-your-father Lamora. Quite superbly indeed.'

5

'He broke the Secret Peace the first night I had him, the cheeky little bastard.' The Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker 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 Thieftmaker said, 'here's the kicker.'