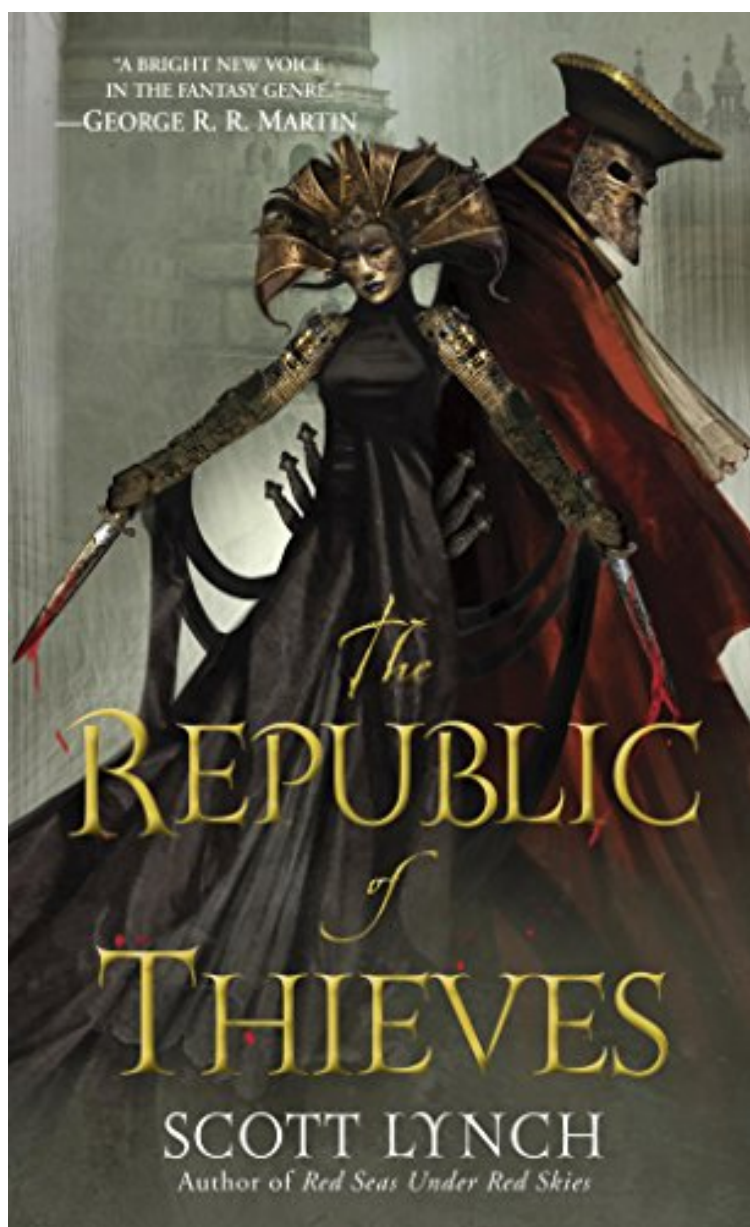


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The Republic of Thieves (Gentleman Bastards, Book 3)



Par Scott Lynch

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Description : Description du produitThe most exciting new commercial fantasy writer of the 21st century

Prsentation de l'diteurNEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERA bright new voice in the fantasy genre (George R. R. Martin), acclaimed author Scott Lynch continues to astound and entertain with his thrillingly inventive, wickedly funny, suspense-filled adventures featuring con artist extraordinaire Locke Lamora. And The Republic of Thieves is his most captivating novel yet. With what should have been the greatest heist of

their career gone spectacularly sour, Locke and his trusted partner, Jean, have barely escaped with their lives. Or at least Jean has. But Locke is slowly succumbing to a deadly poison that no alchemist or physiker can cure. Yet just as the end is near, a mysterious Bondsmage offers Locke an opportunity that will either save him or finish him off once and for all. Magi political elections are imminent, and the factions are in need of a pawn. If Locke agrees to play the role, sorcery will be used to purge the venom from his body though the process will be so excruciating he may well wish for death. Locke is opposed, but two factors cause his will to crumble: Jeans imploring and the Bondsmages mention of a woman from Lockes past: Sabetha. She is the love of his life, his equal in skill and wit, and now, his greatest rival. Locke was smitten with Sabetha from his first glimpse of her as a young fellow orphan and thief-in-training. But after a tumultuous courtship, Sabetha broke away. Now they will reunite in yet another clash of wills. For faced with his one and only match in both love and trickery, Locke must choose whether to fight Sabetha or to woo her. It is a decision on which both their lives may depend.

PRAISE FOR SCOTT LYNCH
The Republic of Thieves Fast paced, fun, and impossible to put down . . . Locke and company remain among the most engaging protagonists in fantasy. Publishers Weekly (starred review) The Republic of Thieves has all the colorful action, witty repartee, and devious scheming that fans of the series have come to expect. Wired A fantasy world unique among its peers . . . If youre looking for a great new fantasy series this is one you wont want to miss. . . . In a word: AWESOME!
SF Revu Red Seas Under Red Skies Lynch hasnt merely imagined a far-off world, hes created it, put it all down on paper the smells, the sounds, the people, the feel of the place. The novel is a virtuoso performance, and sf/fantasy fans will gobble it up. Booklist (starred review) Red Seas Under Red Skies firmly proves that Scott Lynch isnt a one-hit wonder. . . . Itll only be a matter of time before Scott Lynch is mentioned in the same breath as George R. R. Martin and Steven Erikson. Fantasy Book Critic Grand, grandiose, grandiloquent . . . No critic is likely to fault Lynch in his overflowing qualities of inventiveness, audacious draftsmanship, and sympathetic characterization. Locus The Lies of Locke Lamora Right now, in the full flush of a second reading, I think The Lies of Locke Lamora is probably in my top ten favorite books ever. Maybe my top five. If you havent read it, you should. If you have read it, you should probably read it again. Patrick Rothfuss, New York Times bestselling author of The Name of the Wind From the Hardcover edition. Extrait I HER SHADOW I CANNOT tell you now; When the winds drive and whirl Blow me along no longer, And the winds a whisper at last—Maybe Ill tell you then some other time. Carl Sandburg from The Great Hunt Chapter One THINGS GET WORSE I Weak sunlight against his eyelids drew him out of sleep. The brightness intruded, grew, made him blink groggily. A window was open, letting in mild afternoon air and a freshwater smell. Not Camorr. Sound of waves lapping against a sand beach. Not Camorr at all. He was tangled in his sheets again, light-headed. The roof of his mouth felt like sun--dried leather. Chapped lips peeled apart as he croaked, What are you... Shhhh. I didnt mean to wake you. The room needed some air. A dark blur on the left, more or less Jeans height. The floor creaked as the shape moved about. Soft rustle of fabric, snap of a coin purse, clink of metal. Locke pushed himself up on his elbows, prepared for the dizziness. It came on punctually. I was dreaming about her, he muttered. The times that we... when we first met. Her? Her. You know. Ah. The canonical her. Jean knelt beside the bed and held out a cup of water, which Locke took in his shaking left hand and sipped at gratefully. The world was slowly coming into focus. So vivid, said Locke. Thought I could touch her. Tell her... how sorry I am. Thats the best you can manage? Dreaming of a woman like that, and all you can think to do with your time is apologize? Hardly under my control—Theyre your dreams. Take the reins. I was just a little boy, for the gods sakes. If she pops up again move it forward ten or fifteen years. I want to see some blushing and stammering next time you wake up. Going somewhere? Out for a bit. Making my rounds. Jean, theres no point. Quit torturing yourself. Finished? Jean took the empty cup from him. Not nearly. I—Wont be gone long. Jean set the cup on the table and gave the lapels of his coat a perfunctory brushing as he moved to the door. Get some more rest. You dont bloody listen to reason, do you? You know what they say about imitation and flattery. The door slid shut and Jean was gone, out into the streets of La-shain. 2 Lashain was famous as a city where anything could be bought and anything could be left behind. By the grace of the regio, the citys highest and thinnest order of nobility (where a title that could be traced back more than two generations qualified one for the old guard), just about anyone with cash in hand and enough of a pulse to maintain semiconsciousness could have their blood transmuted to a reasonable facsimile of blue. From every corner of the Therin world they came—merchants and criminals, mercenary captains and pirates, gamblers and adventurers and exiles. As commoners they entered the chrysalis of a countinghouse, shed vast quantities of precious metal, and as newborn peers of Lashain they emerged into daylight. The regio minted demibarons,

barons, viscounts, counts, and even the occasional marquis, with styles largely of their own invention. Honors were taken from a list and cost extra; Defender of the Twelfefold Faith was quite popular. There were also half a dozen meaningless orders of knighthood that looked marvelous on a coat lapel. Because of the novelty of this purchased respectability to those who brokered it for themselves, Lashain was the most violently manners--conscious city Jean Tannen had ever visited. Lacking centuries of aristocratic descent to assure them of their worth, the neophytes of Lashain overcompensated with ceremony. Their rules of precedence were like alchemical formulae, and dinner parties killed more of them each year than fevers and accidents combined. It seemed that little could be more thrilling for those whod just bought their family names than to risk them (not to mention their mortal flesh) over minor insults. The record, as far as Jean had heard, was three days from counting--house to dueling green to funeral cart. The regio, of course, offered no refunds to relations of the deceased. As a result of this nonsense, it was difficult for those without titles, regardless of the color of their coin, to gain ready access to the citys best physikers. They were made such status symbols by their noble clients that they rarely had to scamper after gold from other sources. The taste of autumn was in the cool wind blowing off the Amathel, the Lake of Jewels--the freshwater sea that rolled to the horizon north of Lashain. Jean was conservatively dressed by local standards, in a brown velvet frock coat and silks worth no more than, say, three months wages for an average tradesman. This marked him instantly as someones man and suited his current task. No gentleman of consequence did his own waiting at a physikers garden gate. Scholar Erkemar Zodesti was regarded as the finest physiker in Lashain, a prodigy with the bone saw and the alchemists crucible. Hed also shown complete disinterest, for three days straight, in Jeans requests for a consultation. Today Jean once again approached the iron--barred gate at the rear of Zodestis garden, from behind which an elderly servant peered at him with reptilian insolence. In Jeans outstretched hand was a parchment envelope and a square of white card, just like the three days previous.

Jean was getting testy. The servant reached between the bars without a word and took everything Jean offered. The envelope, containing the customary gratuity of (far too many) silver coins, vanished into the servants coat. The old man read or pretended to read the white card, raised his eyebrows at Jean, and walked away. The card said exactly what it always did--*Contempla va cora frata eminenza*. Consider the request of an eminent friend, in the Throne Therin that was the polite affectation for this sort of gesture. Rather than giving an aristocrats name, this message meant that someone powerful wished to pay anonymously to have someone else examined. This was a common means of bringing wealth to bear on the problem of, say, a pregnant mistress, without directly compromising the identity of anyone important. Jean passed the long minutes of his wait by examining the physikers house. It was a good solid place, about the size of a smaller Alcegrante mansion back in Camorr. Newer, though, and done up in a mock Tal Verrar style that labored to proclaim the importance of its inhabitants. The roof was tiled with slats of volcanic glass, and the windows bordered with decorative carvings that would have better suited a temple. From the heart of the garden itself, closed off from view by a ten--foot stone wall, Jean could hear the sounds of a lively party. Clinking glasses, shrieks of laughter, and behind it all the hum of a nine--stringed viol and a few other instruments. I regret to inform your master that the scholar is presently unable to accommodate his request for a consultation. The servant reappeared behind the iron gate with empty hands. The envelope, a token of earnestness, was of course gone. Whether into the hands of Zodesti or this servant, Jean couldnt say. Perhaps you might tell me when it would be more convenient for the scholar to receive my masters petition, said Jean, the middle of the afternoon for half a week now being obviously unsuitable. I couldnt say. The servant yawned. The scholar is consumed with work. With work. Jean fumed as the sound of applause drifted from the garden party. Indeed. My master has a case which requires the greatest possible skill and discretion--Your master could rely upon the scholars discretion at all times, said the servant. Unfortunately, his skill is urgently required elsewhere at the moment. Gods damn you, man! Jeans self--control evaporated. This is important! I will not be spoken to in a vulgar fashion. Good day. Jean considered reaching through the iron bars and seizing the old man by the throat, but that would have been counter-productive. He wore no fighting leathers under his finery, and his decorative shoes would be worse than bare feet in a scuffle. Despite the pair of hatchets tucked away under his coat, he wasnt equipped to storm even a garden party by choice. The scholar risks giving offense to a citizen of considerable importance, growled Jean. The scholar is giving offense, you simple fellow. The old man chuckled. I tell you plainly, he has little interest in the sort of business arranged in this fashion. I dont believe a single citizen of quality is so unfamiliar with the scholar that they need fear to be received by the front door. Ill call again tomorrow, said Jean, straining to keep his composure. Perhaps I might name a sum that will penetrate even your masters indifference. You are to be commended for your persistence, if not for

your perception. Tomorrow you must do as your master bids. For now, I have already said good day. Good day, growled Jean. May the gods cherish the house wherein such kindness dwells. He bowed stiffly and left. There was nothing else to be done at the moment, in this gods--damned city where even throwing envelopes of coins was no guarantee of attracting attention to a problem. As he stomped back to his hired carriage, Jean cursed Maxilan Stragos for the thousandth time. The bastard had lied about so much. Why, in the end, had the damned poison been the one thing he'd chosen to tell the truth about? Home for the time being was a rented suite in the Villa Suvela, an unadorned but scrupulously clean rooming house favored by travelers who came to Lashain to take the waters of the Amathel. Those waters were said to cure rheumatism, though Jean had yet to see a bather emerge leaping and dancing. The rooming house overlooked a black sand beach on the city's northeast shore, and the other lodgers kept to themselves. The bastard, said Jean as he threw open the door to the suite's inner apartment. The motherless Lashani reptile. The greedy son of a piss--bucket and a bad fart. My keen grasp of subtle nuance tells me you might be frustrated, said Locke. He was sitting up, and he looked fully awake. We've been snobbed off again, said Jean, frowning. Despite the fresh air from the window the inner apartment still smelled of old sweat and fresh blood. Zodesti won't come. Not today, at least. To hell with him, then, Jean. He's the only physiker of repute I haven't got to yet. Some of the others were difficult, but he's being impossible. I've been pinched and bled by every gods--damned lunatic in this city who ever shoved a bolus down a throat, said Locke. One more hardly signifies. He's the best. Jean flung his coat over a chair, set his hatchets down, and removed a bottle of blue wine from a cabinet. An alchemical expert. A real smirking rat--fucker, too. It's all for the good, then, said Locke. What would the neighbors say if I consulted a man who screws rodents? We need his opinion. I'm tired of being a medical curiosity, said Locke. If he won't come, he won't come. I'll call again tomorrow. Jean poured two half--glasses of wine and watered them until they were a pleasant afternoon--sky color. I'll have the self--important prick here one way or another. What would you do, break his fingers if he won't consult? Might make things ticklish for me. Especially if he wants to cut something off. He might find a solution. Oh, for the gods sake. Locke's frustrated sigh turned into a cough. There is no solution. Trust me. Tomorrow is going to be one of my unusually persuasive days. As I see it, it costs us only a few pieces of gold to discover how unfashionable we are. Most social failures incur far greater expense, I should think. Somewhere out there, said Jean, must be an illness that makes its sufferers meek, mild, and agreeable. I'll find it someday, and see that you get the worst possible case. I'm sure I was born immune. Speaking of agreeable, will that wine be arriving in my hands any time this year? Locke had seemed alert enough, but his voice was slurring, and weaker than it had been even the day before. Jean approached the bed uneasily, wineglasses held out like a peace offering to some unfamiliar and potentially dangerous creature. Locke had been in this condition before, too thin and too pale, with weeks of beard on his cheeks. Only this time there was no obvious wound to tend, no cuts to bandage. Just Maxilan Stragos' insidious legacy doing its silent work. Locke's sheets were spotted with blood and with the dark stains of fever--sweat. His eyes gleamed in bruised sockets. Jean pored over a pile of medical texts each night, and still he didn't have adequate words for what was happening to Locke. He was being unknit from the inside; his veins and sinews were coming apart. Blood seeped out of him as though by some demonic whim. One hour he might cough it up, the next it would come from his eyes or nose. Gods damn it, Jean whispered as Locke reached for the wineglass. Locke's left hand was red with blood, as though his fingers had been dipped in it. What's this? Nothing unusual. Locke chuckled. It started up while you were gone... from under my nails. Here, I can hold the glass with my other one--Were you trying to hide it from me? Who else changes your gods--damned sheets? Jean set the glasses down and moved to the table beneath the window, which held stacks of linen towels, a water jug, and a washing bowl. The bowl's water was rusty with old blood. It doesn't hurt, Jean, muttered Locke. Ignoring him, Jean picked up the bowl. The window overlooked the villa's interior courtyard, which was fortunately deserted. Jean heaved the old bloody water out the window, refilled the bowl from the jug, and dipped a linen cloth into it. Hand, said Jean. Locke sulkily complied, and Jean molded the wet cloth around his fingers. It turned pink. Keep it elevated for a while. I know it looks bad, but it's really not that much blood. You've little left to lose! I'm also in want of wine. Jean fetched their glasses again and carefully placed one in Locke's right hand. Locke's shakes didn't seem too bad for the moment, which was pleasing. He'd had difficulty holding things lately. A toast, said Locke. To alchemists. May they all be stricken with the screaming fire--shits. He sipped his wine. Or strangled in bed. Whatever's most convenient. I'm not picky. At his next sip, he coughed, and a ruby--colored droplet spiraled down into his wine, leaving a purplish tail as it dissolved. Gods, said Jean. He gulped the rest of his own wine and set the glass aside. I'm going out to fetch

Malcor.Jean, I dont need another damned dog--leech at the moment. Hes been here six or seven times already. Why-Something might have changed. Something might be different. Jean grabbed his coat. Maybe he can help the bleeding. Maybe hell finally find some clue-There is no clue, Jean. Theres no antidote thats going to spring from Malcor or Kepira or Zodesti or any boil--lancing fraud in this whole tedious shitsack of a city.Ill be back soon.Dammit, Jean, save the money! Locke coughed again, and nearly dropped his wine. Its only common sense, you brick--skulled tub! You obstinate-Ill be back soon.... obstinate, uh, something...

something... biting and witty and thoroughly convincing! Hey, if you leave now, youll miss me being thoroughly convincing! Damn it.Whatever Locke might have said next, Jean closed the door on it. The sky outside was now banded in twilight colors, orange at the horizons giving way to silver and then purple in the deep bowl of the heavens. Purple like the color of blood dissolving in blue wine.A low gray wall sliding in to the north, from out of the Amathel, seemed to promise an oncoming storm. That suited Jean just fine.4Six

weeks had passed since theyd left the little port of Vel Virazzo in a forty--foot yacht, fresh from a series of more or less total disasters that had left them with a fraction of the vast sum theyd hoped to recoup for two years invested in a complex scheme.As he walked out into the streets of Lashain, Jean ran his fingers over a lock of curly dark hair, tightly bound with leather cords. This he always kept in a coat pocket or tucked into

his belt. Of all the things hed lost recently, the money was the least of his concerns.Locke and Jean had discussed sailing east, back toward Tamalek and Espara... back toward Camorr. But most of the world theyd known there was swept away, and most of their old friends were dead. Instead theyd gone west. North and west.Following the coast, straining their lubberly skills to the utmost, they had skirted Tal Verrar, swept past the blackened remains of once--luxurious Salon Corbeau, and discussed making far north for Balinel, in the Kingdom of the Seven Marrows. Both of them spoke Vadrans well enough to do just about anything while

they sought some new criminal opportunity.They left the sea and headed inland, up the wide River Cavendria, which was Eldrens--tamed and fit for oceangoing vessels. The Cavendria flowed west from the Amathel, Lake of Jewels, the inland sea that separated the ancient sister--cities of Karthain and Lashain.

Locke and Jean had once hoped to buy their way into the ranks of Lashains nobility. Their revised plan had merely been to weigh their boat down with stores for the voyage up to Balinel.Lockes symptoms revealed

themselves the day they entered the Cavendria estuary.At first it had been nothing more than bouts of dizziness and blurred vision, but as the days passed and they slowly tacked against the current, he began bleeding from his nose and mouth. By the time they reached Lashain, he could no longer laugh away or hide his increasing weakness. Instead of taking on stores, theyd rented rooms, and against Lockes protests Jean

began to spend nearly every coin they had in pursuit of comforts and cures.From Lashains underworld, which was tolerably colorful if nowhere near the size of Camorrs, hed consulted every poisoner and black alchemist he could bribe. All had shaken their heads and expressed professional admiration for what had been done to Locke; the substance in question was beyond their power to counteract. Locke had been made to drink a hundred different purgatives, teas, and elixirs, each seemingly more vile and expensive than the last, each ultimately useless.After that, Jean had dressed well and started calling on accredited physikers.

Locke was explained away as a confidential servant of someone wealthy, which could have meant anything from secret lover to private assassin. The physikers too had expressed regret and fascination in equal measure. Most had refused to attempt cures, instead offering palliatives to ease Lockes pain. Jean fully

grasped the meaning of this, but paid no heed to their pessimism. He simply showed each to the door, paid their exorbitant fees, and went after the next physiker on his list.The money hadnt lasted. After a few days, Jean had sold their boat (along with the resident cat, essential for good luck at sea), and was happy to get

half of what theyd paid for it.Now even those funds were running thin, and Erkemar Zodesti was just about the only physiker in Lashain who had yet to tell Jean that Lockes condition was hopeless.5No new

symptoms, said Malcor, a round old man with a gray beard that curled out from his chin like an oncoming thunderhead. Malcor was a dog--leech, a street physiker with no formal training or license, but of all his kind available in Lashain he was the most frequently sober. Merely a new expression of familiar symptoms. Take

heart.Not likely, said Locke. But thanks for the hand job.Malcor had poulticed the tips of Lockes fingers with a mixture of corn meal and honey, then tied dry linen bandages around the fingers, turning Lockes left hand into a padded lump of uselessness.Heh. Well, the gods love a man who laughs at hardship.Hardship is

boring as all hell. Gotta find laughs if you cant stay drunk, said Locke.So the bleeding is nothing new? Nothing worse than before? asked Jean.A new inconvenience, yes. Malcor hesitated, then shrugged. As for the total loss to his bodys sanguine humors... I cant say. A close examination of his water could, perhaps-You want a bowl full of piss, said Locke, you can uncork your private reserve. Ive given quite enough since

I came here. Well, then. Malcors knees creaked like rusty hinges as he stood up. If I wont scry your piss, I wont scry your piss. I can, however, leave you with a pill that should bring you excellent relief for twelve to twenty--four hours, and perhaps encourage your depleted humors to rekindle--Splendid, said Locke. Will it be the one composed primarily of chalk, this time? Or the one made of sugar? Id prefer sugar. Look... I say, look here! Malcors seamy old face grew red. I might not have Collegium robes, but when I go to the gods theyll know that I gave an honest damn about lending ease to my patients! Peace, old man. Locke coughed and rubbed his eyes with his unbandaged hand. I know you mean the best. But spare me your placebo. Have your friend remove your bandages in a few hours, said Malcor testily, shrugging back into a worn frock coat that was spattered with dark stains. If you drink, drink sparingly. Water your wine. Rest assured my friend here waters my wine like a virgin princess nervous chaperone. Im sorry, said Jean, as he showed Malcor outside. Hes difficult when hes ill. Hes got two or three days, said the old man. You cant be--Yes, I can. The bleeding is worse. His enervation is more pronounced. His humors are terminally imbalanced, and Im certain an examination of his water would show blood. I tried to hearten him, but your friend is obviously undeceived. But--As should you be. There must be someone who can do something! The gods. If I could convince Zodesti--Zodesti? Malcor laughed. What a waste of a gift in that one. Zodesti treats only two ailments, wealth and prominence. Hell never condescend to do so much as take your friends pulse. So youve no other clues? No other suggestions? Summon priests. While hes still lucid. Jean scowled, and the aged dog--leech took him gently by the shoulders. I cant name the poison thats killing your friend. But the one thats killing you is called hope. Thank you for your time, growled Jean. He shook several silver coins out of his purse. If I should have further need of these marvelous insights--A single duvesta will be quite adequate, said Malcor. And despite your mood now, know that Ill come whenever you require. Your friends discomfort is more likely to wax than wane before the end. The sun was gone, and the roofs and towers of the city were coming alive with specks of fire against the deepening night. As he watched Malcor vanish down the street, Jean wanted more than anything to have someone to hit. Fair day to you, said Jean, approaching the garden gate again. It was the second hour of the afternoon, the next day, and the sky overhead was a boiling mess of gray. The rain had yet to fall, but it was coming, certain and soon. Im here for my usual petition. How completely unexpected, said the old man behind the iron bars. Is it a convenient time? From inside the garden, Jean could hear laughter again, along with a series of echoing smacks, as though something were being thrown against a stone wall. Or is the scholar consumed--By work. Stranger, has the conversation we had yesterday fled your memory? I must beg you, sir. Jean put as much passionate sincerity as he could into his voice. A good man lies dying, in desperate need of aid. Did your master not take oath as a physiker of the Collegium? His oaths are no business of yours. And many good men lie dying, in desperate want of aid, in Lashain and Karthain and every other place in the world. Do you see the scholar saddling his horse to seek them out? Please. Jean shook a fresh envelope, jingling the coins within. At least carry the message, for the love of all the gods. Wearing half a scowl and half a smirk, the servant reached through the bars. Jean dropped the envelope, seized the man by the collar, and slammed him hard against the gate. An instant later Jean flourished a knife in his free hand. It was a push--dagger, the sort wielded with a thrusting fist rather than a fencers grip. The blade seated against Jeans knuckles was half a foot long and curved like an animals claw. Theres only one use for a knife like this, whispered Jean. You see it? You try to call out or pull away, and youll be wearing your belly--fat for an apron. Open the gate. Youll die for this, hissed the servant. Theyll skin you and boil you in salt water. And what a consolation that will be for you, eh? Jean prodded him in the stomach with his knife. Open the gate or Ill take the keys from your corpse. With a shaking hand, the old man opened the gate. Jean threw it aside, grabbed the servant again, and turned him around. The knife was now at the small of the mans back. Take me to your master. Stay composed. Tell him that an important case has come up and that he will want to hear my offer. The scholar is in the garden. But youre mad... He has friends in the highest places... urk! Jean poked him again with the blade, urging him forward. Of course, said Jean. But do you have any friends closer than my knife? At the heart of the garden, a short, solid man of about thirty--five was sharing a hearty laugh with a woman who had yet to see twenty. Both of them wore light breeches, silk shirts, and padded leather gloves. That explained the rhythmic noise from before. Theyd been using a cleared section of stone wall for pursava, the partner chase, an aristocratic cousin of handball. Sir, madam, a thousand pardons, said the servant at another poke from Jean. Jean stood half a pace behind the man, where neither Zodesti nor his guest could see the true means of his entry into the garden. A very urgent matter, sir. Urgent? Zodesti had a mop of black curls, now slick with sweat, and the remains of an upper--class Verrari accent. Who does this fellow come to speak for? An eminent friend, said

Jean. In the usual fashion. It would not be appropriate to discuss these matters in front of your young-By the gods, Ill say whats appropriate or not in my own garden! This fellow has some cheek, Loran. You know my preferences. This had better be in earnest.Dire earnest, sir.Let him leave his particulars. If I find them suitable he may call again after dinner.Now would be better, said Jean, for everyone.Who in all the hells do you think you are? Shit on your dire earnest! Loran, throw this-Refusal noted and cordially declined. Jean shoved Loran to the turf. Half a second later he was upon Zodesti, with a meaty forearm wrapped around the physikers throat and his blade held up so the young woman could see it. Cry out for help and I will use this, madam. I would hate to have an injury to the scholar resting upon your conscience.I... I... , she said.Babble all you like, so long as you dont scream. As for you- Jean squeezed the mans windpipe to demonstrate his strength, and the physiker gasped. Ive tried to be civil. I would have paid well. But now Ill teach you a new way of doing business. Do you have a kit you would bring to a case of poisoning? Materials youd need for a consultation?Yes, choked Zodesti. In my study.Were going to calmly walk into your house, all of us. On your feet, Loran. You have a carriage and driver on the grounds, Scholar?Yes, said Zodesti.Inside, then, as though nothing is amiss. If any of you give me any trouble, by the gods, Ill start practicing throat surgery.7The ticklish part was getting them all into Zodestis study, past the curious eyes of a cook and a kitchen--boy. But none of Jeans hostages caused a scene, and soon enough the study door was between them and any interference. Jean shot the bolt, smiled, and said, Loran, would you-At that moment, the old man found the courage for a last desperate struggle. Foul as his temper was, Jean didnt truly have the heart to stab the poor idiot, and smashed the edge of his knife hand into Lorans jaw instead. The servant hit the floor senseless. Zodesti darted to a desk in the corner and had a drawer open before Jean collared him and flung him down beside Loran. Jean glanced into the drawer and laughed.Going to fight me off with a letter-- opener? Take a seat, both of you. Jean indicated a pair of armchairs against the rear wall. While Zodesti and his companion sat there, wide--eyed as pupils awaiting punishment from a tutor, Jean cut down one of the drapes that hung beside the studys shuttered window. He slashed it into strips and tossed them to Zodesti.I dont quite understand-Your young friend offers a problem, said Jean. Meaning no particular offense to you, madam, but one hostage is difficult enough to handle, let alone two. Particularly when theyre clumsy amateur hostages, unused to their roles and expectations. So well leave you in that fine big closet over there, where you wont be found too late or too soon.How dare you, said the young woman. Ill have you know that my uncle is-Time is precious and my knife is sharp, said Jean. When some servant finally opens that closet, do they find you alive or dead?Alive, she gulped.Gag her, Scholar, said Jean. Then tie some good, firm knots. Ill check them myself when youre done. After shes secure, do the same for old Loran.As Zodesti worked to tie up his pursava partner (if that was indeed the limit of their partnership), Jean tore down another drape and cut it into more strips. His eyes wandered to the rooms glass--fronted cabinets. They contained a collection of books, glass vessels, herbal samples, alchemical powders, and bizarre surgical instruments. Jean was heartened; if Zodestis esoterica reflected his actual ability, he might just have an answer after all.8This will do, said Jean.Michel, said Zodesti, leaning out the window on his side of the carriage, pull up here.The carriage rattled to a halt, and the driver hopped down to open the door. Jean, knife half--concealed by the wide cuff of his coat, gestured for Zodesti to step out first. The scholar did, carrying a leather bag and a bundle of clothing.A light rain had begun to fall, for which Jean was grateful. It would drive bystanders from the streets, and the overcast sky gave the city the look of twilight rather than midafternoon. A kidnapper could ask for no more.Jean had ordered the halt about two blocks from the Villa Suvela, in front of an alley that would lead there by twists and turns with a dozen other possible destinations branching off along the way.The scholar will require several hours, said Jean, passing a folded slip of parchment to the driver. Wait at this address until we meet you again.The address on the parchment was a coffeehouse in Lashains mercantile district, a half--mile distant. The driver frowned.Is this well with you, sir? Youll miss dinner-Its fine, Michel, said Zodesti with a hint of exasperation. Just follow directions.Of course, sir.Once the carriage had clattered down the street, Jean pulled Zo-desti into the alley and said, You may live through this yet. Get dressed as we discussed.The pile of clothing included a battered hat and a rain--stained cloak, both belonging to Loran, who was a fair match in size for his master. Zodesti threw the cloak on, and Jean pulled a strip of slashed drapery from his pocket.What the hell is this, now? said Zodesti.Did you really imagine Id go to all this trouble and let you see where Im taking you? I thought youd prefer blindfolded to unconscious.Zodesti stood still as Jean blindfolded him, pulled up the cloaks hood, and pushed the hat down on top of it. It was a good effect. From more than a few feet away, the blindfold would be concealed by the hat or lost in the shadows of the hood.From Zodestis medical bag, Jean withdrew a

bottle of wine. He pulled the cork (Jean had found the bottle in Zodestis study, half empty), splashed some on the physiker, poured the rest on the ground, and pressed the empty bottle into Zodestis right hand. From the smell that wafted up around them, Jean guessed hed just wasted a very valuable kameleona. Now, said Jean, youre my drunk friend, being escorted to safety. Keep your head down. Jean pressed Zodestis bag into the physikers left hand. Ive got my arms around you to keep you from stumbling, and my knife closer than youd like. Youll boil alive for this, you son of a bitch. Lets keep my mother out of this. Mind your feet. It took about ten minutes for them to stumble to the rooming house together. There were no complications. The few people out in the rain had better things to pay attention to than a pair of drunks, it seemed. Once safely inside their suite, Jean locked the front doors, shoved Zodesti into a chair, and said, Now were well away from anyone else. If you try to escape, or raise your voice, or call attention to yourself in any way, Ill hurt you. Badly. Stop threatening me and show me your damned patient. In a moment. Jean opened the doors to the inner apartment, saw that Locke was awake, and quickly gestured in their private sign language: Dont use any names. What am I, muttered Locke, an idiot? I knew he wasnt coming back here of his own free will. How- You wore your fighting boots and left your dress shoes by the wardrobe. And all of your weapons are missing. Ah. Jean tore off Zodestis blindfold and disguise. Make yourself comfortable and get to work. The physiker hefted his satchel and, sparing a hateful glance for Jean, moved to Lockes bedside. He stared at Locke for a few moments, then pulled a wooden chair over and sat down. I smell wine, said Locke. Kameleona, I think. I dont suppose youve brought any with you? Only what your friend bathed me with, said Zodesti. He snapped his fingers a few times in front of Lockes eyes, then took his pulse from both wrists. My, you are in a sad state. You believe youve been poisoned? No, said Locke with a cough. I fell down some fucking stairs. Whats it look like? Cant you ever be polite to any of your physikers? said Jean. Youre the one who bloody well kidnapped him. Since I appear to have no choice, said Zodesti, Im going to give you a thorough examination. This may cause some discomfort, but dont complain. I wont be listening. Zodestis first examination took a quarter of an hour. Ignoring Lockes grumbling, he poked and prodded at his joints and limbs, working from the top of his arms to his feet. Youre losing sensation in your extremities, said Zodesti at last. How the hell can you tell? I just stuck a lancet into each of your large toes. You poked holes in my feet? Im adding teardrops to a river, given the blood youre losing elsewhere. Zodesti fumbled in his bag, removed a silk case, and from this extracted a pair of optics with oversized lenses. Wearing them, he pulled Lockes lips back and examined his gums and teeth. Ahm naht a fckhng horth, said Locke. Quiet. Zodesti held the clean portion of one of Lockes discarded bandages to his gums for several seconds, pulled it away, and frowned at it. Your gums are seeping blood. And I see your fingernails are trim, said Zodesti. What of it? Were they trimmed on a Penance Day? How the hell should I remember? Trimming the nails on any day but a Penance Day weakens the blood. Tell me, when you were first taken with your symptoms, did you think to swallow an amethyst? Why would I have had one close at hand? Your pig--ignorance of basic medicine is your own misfortune. You sound like an easterner, though, so I cant say Im surprised. The rest of the physikers work took an hour, with Zodesti performing increasingly esoteric tests and Jean hovering behind him, alert for any sign of treachery. Finally, Zodesti sighed and rose to his feet, wiping his bloody hands on Lockes sheets. You have the unfortunate distinction, said Zodesti, of being poisoned by a substance beyond my experience. Given the fact that I have a Masters Ring in alchemy from the Therin Collegium- Gods damn your jewelry, said Jean. Can you do anything? In the early stages of the poisoning, who could have said? But now... Zodesti shrugged. You maggot! Jean grabbed Zodesti by his lapels, whirled, and slammed him against the wall beside Lockes bed. You arrogant little fraud! Youre the best this city has? DO SOMETHING! I cant, said Zodesti with a new firmness in his voice. Think whatever you like, do whatever you like. He is beyond my powers of intervention. I daresay that puts him beyond anyones. Let him go, said Locke. There must be something- Let him go! Locke retched, spat up more blood, and broke into a coughing fit. Jean released Zodesti, and the physiker slid away, glaring. Shortly after the poison was administered, said the physiker, I could have tried a purgative. Or filled his stomach with milk and parchment pulp. Or bled him to thin out the venom. But this thing has been with him for too long now. Even with known poisons, he continued, returning his instruments to his bag, there comes a point where the harm to organs or humors cannot be reversed. Antidotes dont restore dead flesh. And with this, an unknown poison? His blood is pouring out of him. I cant just put it back. Gods damn it, whispered Jean. The question is no longer if but when, said Zodesti. Look, you ugly bastard, despite the way you brought me into this mess, Ive given him my full and fair attention. I see. Jean slowly walked over to the linen table, took up a clay cup, and filled it with water from the jug. Do you have anything with you that can bring about a strong sleep? In case his pain

should worsen?Of course. Zodesti removed a small paper pouch from his bag. Have him take this in water or wine and he wont be able to keep his eyes open.Now wait just a damn minute, said Locke.Give it here, said Jean. He took the packet, poured its contents into the water, and shook the cup several times. How long will it last?Hours.Good. Jean passed the cup to Zodesti and gestured at it with a dagger. Drink up.What?I dont want you running off to the first constable you can find as soon as I dump you on the street.Dont think I would be so foolish as to try and run from you-Dont think I give a damn. Drink the whole thing or Ill break your arms.Zodesti quickly gulped the contents of the cup. How Im going to laugh when they catch you, you son of a bitch. He tossed the cup down carelessly on Lockes bed and sat with his back against the wall. All the justices of Lashain are my patients. Your friends too sick to run. If hes still alive when they catch you, theyll draw and quarter him just to give you something to watch while you wait for your own exe... execution... .A few seconds later his head rolled forward and he began snoring.Think hes pretending? said Locke.Jean shoved the tip of his dagger into the calf of Zodestis outstretched right leg. The physiker didnt stir.I hate to say that I told you so, said Locke, settling back against his cushions and folding his hands in front of him. Wait, no I dont. I could use a bottle of wine, and dont add any water this-Ill get Malcor, said Jean. Ill have him stay the night. Constant attention.Damn it, Jean, wake up. Locke coughed and pounded on his chest. What a reversal this is, eh? I wanted to die in Vel Virazzo and you pulled me back to my senses. Now I really am dying and youre bereft of yours.Theres-No more physikers, Jean. No more alchemists, no more dog--leeches. No more rocks to pry up looking for miracles.How can you just lie there like a fish washed up on shore, with no fight at all?I suppose I could flop around a bit, if you thought it would help.The Gray King sliced you like a veal cutlet and you came back from that, twice as aggravating as ever.Sword cuts. If they dont turn green, you can expect to heal. Its the nature of things. With black alchemy, who the hell knows?Ill give you wine, but I want you to take it with two parts water, like Malcor said. And I want you to eat tonight, everything you can. Keep your strength up-Ill eat, but only to give the wine some ballast. Theres no other point to it, Jean. Theres no cure forthcoming.If you cant be cured, youll have to endure. Outlast it, until it breaks like a fever.The poisons more likely to last than I am. Locke coughed and dabbed at his mouth with one of his sheets. Jean, youve called down some trouble by stealing this little weasel out of his house. Surely you can see that.I was very careful.You know better! Hell remember your face, and Lashains not so very big. Look, take the money thats left. Take it and get out of town tonight. You can slip into a dozen trades at will, you speak four languages, youll be wealthy again in-Incomprehensible babble. Jean sat on the edge of the bed and gently pushed Lockes sweat--slick hair out of his eyes. I dont understand a word youre saying.Jean, I know you. Youll kill half a city block when your bloods up, but youll never slit the throat of a sleeping man whos done us no real harm. That means constables will kick our doors down sooner or later. Please dont be here when they do.You brought this upon yourself when you cheated that antidote into my glass. The consequences are yours to-Like hell. You would have robbed me of that choice, too! Gods, all this maneuvering for moral advantage! Youd think we were married. Locke coughed and arched his back. The gods must truly have it in for you, to make you my nurse, he said quietly. Not once but twice, now.Hell, they made me your nurse when I was ten years old. You can knock down kingdoms on a whim. What you need is someone to make sure you dont get hit by a carriage when you cross the street.Thats all over now, though. And it might have been kinder for you if I had been hit by a carriage-You see this? Jean took the tightly bound lock of dark, curly hair out of his coat pocket and held it up. You see this, you bloody bastard? You know where it came from. Im done losing. Do you fucking hear me? I am done losing. Spare me your precious self--pity, because this isnt a stage and I didnt pay two coppers to cry my eyes out over anyones death speech. You dont fucking get one, understand? I dont care if you cough up buckets of blood. Buckets I can carry. I dont care if you howl like a dog for months. Youre going to eat and drink and keep fighting.Well, said Locke after a few moments had passed in silence. He smiled wryly. If you are going to be an intractable son of a bitch, why dont you uncork that wine so we can start with the part about drinking?9Jean left Zodesti in an alley about three blocks west of the Villa Suvela, taking care to conceal him well and cover his bag with trash. He wouldnt be at all pleased when he awoke, but at least hed be alive.Lockes condition changed little that night; he slept in fits and starts, sipped wine, grudgingly chewed cold beef and soft bread, and continued bleeding. Jean fell asleep sitting up and managed to spill ale over a useless treatise on poisons. Most of their nights had been like this, recently.The rain kept up well into the next night, enfolding the city in murk. Just before the unseen sundown Jean went out to fetch fresh supplies. There was a merchants inn not ten minutes from the Villa Suvela that was used to dealing in necessities at odd hours.When Jean came back, the front door was completely unmarked. He had no reason

to suspect that anything was amiss, until he glanced down in the entry and saw the great mess of water that had recently been brought across the threshold. Movement on both sides—too many attackers, too prepared. A

basket of food and wine was no weapon at all. Jean went down under a press of bodies. With desperate strength he smashed a nose, kicked a foot, tried to claw out the space he needed to pull and use his hatchets—

Enough, said a commanding voice. Jean looked up. The door to the inner apartment was open, and there were men standing over Lockes bed. No! Jean yelled, ceasing his fight. Four men seized him and dragged him into the inner room, where he counted at least five more visible opponents. One of them grabbed a towel

from the linens table and held it up to his bleeding nose. Im sorry, said Locke, hoarsely. They came right after you left—Quiet. The speaker was a rugged man about Locke and Jeans age, with a brawlers scarred jaw and a nose that looked like it had been used to break a hard fall. His hair was scraped down to stubble, and

he wore quality fighting leathers under a long black coat. Had Jean been thinking straight, he would have realized that the consequences of Zodestis abduction might come back to them from directions other than the

Lashani constabulary. Hows your head, Leone? Broge my fuggin node, said the man holding a towel to his face. Builds character. The man in the black coat picked up a chair, set it down in front of Jean, then kicked

him in the stomach, good and fast, barely giving him time to flinch before the pain hit. Jean groaned, and the four men holding him bore down on him with all of their weight, lest he try anything stupid. Wait, coughed

Locke. Please—If I have to say quiet again, said the black--coated man, Ill cut your fucking tongue out and pin it to the wall. Now shut up. He sat down in the chair and smiled. My name is Cortessa. Whispers, said

Jean. This was much worse than the constabulary. Whispers Cortessa was a top power in the Lashani underworld. So they call me. I presume youre Andolini. That was the name Jean had given when renting their

rooms, and he nodded. If its real Im the king of the Seven Marrows, said Cortessa. But nobody cares. Can you tell me why Im here? You ran out of sheep to fuck and went looking for some action? Gods, I love

Camorri. Constitutionally incapable of doing things the easy way. Cortessa slapped Jean hard enough to make his eyes water. Try again. Why am I here? You heard, Jean gasped, that wed finally discovered the cure

for being born with a face like a stray dogs ass. No. If that were true you would have used it. Cortessas next blow was no slap, but a back--handed bruise--maker. Jean blinked as the room swam around him. Now, I

would love to sit here and paint the floor with your blood. Leone would probably love it even more. But I think I can save us all a lot of time. Cortessa beckoned, and one of the men standing over Lockes bed lifted a

club. What does your friend lose first? A knee? A few toes? I can be creative. No. Please. Jean would have bent his head to Cortessas feet if he hadnt been restrained. Im the one you want. I wont waste any more of

your time. Please. Youre the one I want, suddenly? Why would I want you? Something about a physiker, Id guess. There we are. That wasnt so hard after all. Cortessa cracked his knuckles. What did you think might

happen when someone like Zodesti came home from the shit you pulled yesterday? Certainly would have been nice if hed never said anything at all. Dont be simple. Now, I know youre a friend of the friends. I hear

things. When you first came to Lashain you knew your business. Kept the peace, made your gifts, behaved. You clearly understand how things work in our world. So do you think Zodesti ran up and down the streets,

screaming that hed been stolen away like a child? Or do you think he sent a few private messages to people who know people? Shit, said Jean. Yeah. So, I got the job and I thought to myself... wasnt there a big man

looking for alchemists and dog--leeches just last week? What might they have to say about him? Oh? A bad poisoning? A man bleeding to death in bed at the Villa Suvela? Cortessa spread his arms and smiled

beatifically. Some problems just solve themselves. How can I make amends? said Jean. You cant. Cortessa stood up, laughing. Please dont do anything to my friend. He had nothing to do with the physiker. Do

whatever you like with me. Ill cooperate. Just—My, youve gone from hard to soft, big man. Youll cooperate?

Of course youll fucking cooperate, youve got four of my men sitting on you. Theres money, said Jean. Money, or I could work for you—Youve got nothing I want, said Cortessa. And thats your problem. But I

have a serious problem of my own. Oh? Ordinarily, this is the part where wed make soup out of your balls and watch you drink it. Ordinarily. But we have what you might call a conflict of interest. On the one hand,

youre an outlander and you touched a Lashani with all the right friends. That says we fucking kill you. On the other hand, its plain you are or were some sort of connected man in Camorr. Big Barsavi might not be

with us anymore, gods rest his crooked soul, but nobody in their right mind wants to fuck with the capas. You could be somebodys cousin. Who knows? A year or two from now, maybe someone comes looking for

you. Asks around town. Whoops! Someone tells them to look on the bottom of the lake. And who gets sent back to Camorr in a box to pay the debt? Yours truly. That says we dont fucking kill you. Like I said, I have

some money, said Jean. If that can help. Its not your money anymore. But what does help is that your friend

here is already dying... and from the looks of it, hell be pretty damn glad to go. Look, if you'll just let him stay, he needs rest-I know. That's why I'm kicking your asses out of Lashain. Cortessa waved his hands at his people. Strip the place. All the food, all the wine. Blankets, bandages, money. Take the wood out of the fireplace. Throw the water out of the jug. Pass word to the innkeeper that these two fucks are under the interdict. Please, said Jean. Please-Shut up. You can keep your clothes and your weapons. I won't send you out completely naked. But I want you gone. By sunrise, you're out of the city or Zodesti gets to cut your ears off himself. Your friend can find somewhere else to die. Cortessa gave Locke a pat on the leg. Think fondly of me in hell, you poor bastard. You might not be long in getting there yourself, said Locke. I'll have a big hug waiting for you. Cortessa's people ransacked the suite. They carefully piled Jean's weapons on the floor; everything else was taken or smashed. Locke was left on the empty bed in his bloodstained breeches and tunic. Jean's private purse and the one that had contained their general funds were both emptied. A few moments later, one of Cortessa's men stuffed the empty purses into his pockets as well. Oh, said Cortessa to Jean as the tumult was winding down, one thing more. Leone gets a minute alone with you in the corner. For his nose. Bleth you, both, muttered Leone, gingerly poking at the swollen bruises that had spread to his lips. And you get to take it, outlander. Lift so much as a finger and I'll have your friend gutted. Cortessa patted Jean on the cheek and turned to leave. Sunrise. Get the fuck out of Lashain. Or our next conversation takes place in Scholar Zodesti's cellar. Jean, whispered Locke as soon as the last of Cortessa's bruisers had left. Jean! Are you all right? I'm fine. Jean was huddled where the linens table had been before Cortessa's men removed it. Leone had been straightforward but enthusiastic, and Jean felt as though he'd been thrown down a rocky hillside. I'm just... enjoying the floor. It was kind enough to catch me when I fell. Jean, listen. I took some of the money when we got here on the boat... I hid it. Loosened a floorboard under the bed. I know you did. I unloosened it. Took it back. You eel! I wanted you to have something to get away with when you-I knew you'd try it, Locke. There weren't many hiding places available within stumbling distance of the bed. Argh! Argh, yourself. Jean heaved himself over on his back and stared at the ceiling, breathing shallowly. Nothing felt broken, but his ribs and everything attached to them were lined up to file complaints. Give me a few minutes. I'll go out and find some blankets for you. I can get a cart. Maybe a boat. Get you out of here somehow, before the dawn. We've got a lot of darkness to use. Jean, you'll be watched until you leave. They're not going to let you- Locke coughed several times. -steal anything big. And I'm not going to let you carry me. Not let me carry you? What are you going to fend me off with, sarcasm? You should have had a few thousand solari to work with, Jean. Could have gone anywhere... done anything with it. I did exactly what I wanted to do with it. Now, you go with me. Or I stay here to die with you. There's no reasoning with you. You're such a paragon of compromise yourself. Pig-brained gods--damned egotist. This isn't a fair contest. You have more energy for big words than I do. Locke laughed. Gods, look at us. Can you believe they even took our firewood? Very little surprises me these days. Jean slowly stood up, wincing all the way. So, inventory. No money. Clothes on our backs. Mostly my back. Some weapons. No firewood. Since I doubt we'll be allowed to lift anything in the city, looks like I'll have to do some highway work. How do you plan on halting carriages? I'll throw you in the road and hope they stop. Criminal genius. Will they be stopping out of heartfelt sympathy? Revulsion, more likely. There was a knock at the front door. Locke and Jean glanced at one another uneasily, and Jean picked up a dagger from the small pile of weapons that had been left to him. Maybe they're back for the bed, said Locke. Why would they bother knocking? Jean kept most of his body behind the door as he opened it, and he tucked the dagger just out of sight behind his back. It wasn't Cortessa, or a dog-leech, or even the master of the Villa Suvela, as Jean had expected. It was a woman, dressed in a richly embroidered oilcloak streaming with water. She held an alchemical globe in her hands, and by its pale light Jean could see that she was not young. Jean scanned the curb behind her. No carriage, no litter, no escort of any sort-just misty darkness and the patter of the rain. A local? A fellow guest of the Villa Suvela? I, uh... can I be of assistance, madam? I believe we can be of assistance to one another. If I might come in? She had a soft and lovely voice, with something very close to a Lashani accent. Close, but not exact. We are... that is, I'm sorry, but we have some difficulty at the moment. My friend is ill. I know they took your furniture. You do? And I know that you and your friend didn't have much else to begin with. Madam, you seem to have me at a disadvantage. And you seem to have me out in the rain. Um. Jean shuffled the dagger and made it vanish up his tunic sleeve. Well, my friend, as I said, is gravely ill. You should be aware-I don't mind. She entered the instant Jean's resolution wavered, and gracefully got out of the way as he closed the door behind her. After all, poison is only contagious at dinner parties. How the hell... are you a physiker? Hardly. Are you with Cortessa? The woman only laughed at that, and threw back the hood of

her oilcloak. She was about fifty, the well--tended sort of fifty that only wealth could make possible, and her hair was the color of dry autumn wheat with currents of silver at the temples. She had a squarish face, with disconcertingly wide, dark eyes. Here, take this. She tossed the alchemical globe to Jean, who caught it by reflex. I know they took your lights, too. Um, thank you, but--My, my. The woman unclasped her cloak and spun it off her shoulders as she strolled into the inner apartment. Her coat and skirts were richly brocaded with silver threads, and puffs of silver lace from beneath her cuffs half--covered her hands. She glanced at Locke. Ill would seem to be an understatement. Forgive me for not getting up, said Locke. And for not offering you a seat. And not being dressed. And for not... giving a damn. Down to the last dregs of your charm, I see. Down to the last dregs of my everything. Who are you, then? The woman shook out her oilcloak, then threw it over Locke like a blanket. Th--thank you. Its difficult to have a serious conversation with someone whose dignity is compromised, Locke. The next sound in the room was that of Jean slamming home the bolt on the front door. In an instant he returned to the inner apartment, knife in hand. He tossed the light--globe onto the bed, where Locke prevented it from bouncing onto the floor. In faith, said Jean, my patience for mysterious shit went out that door with the money and the furniture. So you explain how you know that name, and I wont have to feel guilty for--I doubt youd survive what would happen if you acted on that impulse, Jean Tannen. I know your pride wouldnt. Put your blade away. Like hell! Poor Gentlemen Bastards, said the woman softly. So far from home. But always in our sight. No, said Jean in a disbelieving whisper. Oh, gods, said Locke. He coughed and closed his eyes. Its you. I suspected youd kick our door down sooner or later. You sound disappointed. The woman frowned. As though youd just failed to avoid an awkward social call. Would you really find death preferable to a little conversation, Locke? Little conversations with Bondsmagi never end well. Youre the reason were here, growled Jean. You and your games in Tal Verrar. Your damned letters! Not entirely, said the woman. You didnt scare us in the Night Market. Jeans grip tightened on the hilt of his blade, and the pain of his recent beating was entirely forgotten. You dont fucking scare us now! Then you dont know us at all. I think I do. And I dont give a damn about your gods--damned rules! He was already in motion, and her back was to him. She had no chance to speak or gesture with her hands; his left arm went around her neck and he slammed the dagger home as hard as he could, directly between her shoulder blades. 11 The womans flesh was warm and solid beneath Jeans arm one moment, and in the next his blade bit empty air. Jean had faced many fast opponents in his life, but never one that dissolved instantly at his touch. That wasnt human speed; it was sorcery. His chance was gone. He inhaled sharply, and a cold shudder ran down his back, the old familiar sensation of a misstep made and a blow about to fall. His pulse beat like a drum inside his skull, and he waited for the pain of whatever reprisal was coming--Oh yes, said their visitor mildly from somewhere behind him. That would have been very clever of me, Jean Tannen. Leaving myself at the mercy of a strong man and his grudges. Jean turned slowly, and saw that the woman was now standing about six feet to his left, by the window where the linens table had once been. I hold your true name like a caged bird, she said. Your hands and eyes will deceive you if you try to harm me. Gods, said Jean, suddenly overcome by a vast sense of weary frustration. Must you play with your food? He sat down on the edge of Lockes bed and threw his knife at the floor, where it stuck quivering in the wood. Just kill me like a fucking normal person. I wont be your toy. What will you be? Ill stand still and be boring. Get it over with. Why do you keep assuming Im here to kill you? If not kill, then something worse. I have no intention of murdering either of you. Ever. The woman folded her hands in front of her chest. What more proof do you need than the fact that youre still alive? Could you have stopped me? Youre not gods, said Locke, weakly. You might have us at your mercy, but weve had one of you at ours before. Is that meant to be some poor cousin to a threat? A reminder that you just happened to be present when the Falconers terrible judgment finally got the best of him? How is dear Falconer these days? asked Locke. Well kept. In Karthain. The woman sighed. As he was when agents of Camorr brought him home. Witless and comatose. He didnt seem to react well to pain, said Jean. And you imagine it was your torture that drove him mad? Cant have been our conversation, said Locke. His real problem is self--inflicted. You see, we can deaden our minds to any suffering of the flesh. But that art requires caution. Its extremely dangerous to use it in haste. Im delighted to hear that, said Locke. Youre saying that when he tried to escape the pain--His mind jailed itself, in a haze of his own making, said the woman. And so weve been unable to correct his condition. Marvelous, said Locke. I dont really care how or why it happened, Im still glad that it did. In fact I encourage the rest of you to use that power in haste. You do many of us an injustice, said the woman. Bitch, if I had the power Id pull your heart out of your chest and use it for a handball, said Locke, coughing. Id do it to all of you. You people kill anyone you like and fuck with the lives of those that treat you fairly for

it. Despising us must be rather like staring into a mirror, then. I despise you, said Locke, straining to heave himself up, for Calo and Galdo, and for Bug, and for Nazca and Ezri, and for all the time we... wasted in... Tal Verrar. Red-faced and shuddering, he fell back to the empty bed. You're murderers and thieves, said the woman. You leave a trail of confusion and outrage wherever you go. You've brought down at least one government, and prevented the destruction of another for sentimental reasons. Can you really keep a straight face when you damn us for doing as we please? We can, said Jean. And I can take the matter of Ezri very personally. Would you even have met the woman if we hadn't intervened in your affairs? Would you have gone to sea? That's not for any of us to say--So we own your misfortunes entirely, yet receive no credit for happier accidents. I--We've interfered here and there, Jean, but you're flattering yourself if you imagine that we've drawn such an intricate design around you. The woman died in battle, and we had nothing to do with that. I'm sorry for your loss. Are you capable of feeling sorry for anything? The woman came toward Jean, reaching out with her left hand, and it took every ounce of his self--control not to fling himself away. He rose to his feet and stared fiercely down at her as she set warm fingers gently against his cheek. Time is precious, she said. I lift my ban upon you, Jean Tannen. This is my real flesh against yours. I might be able to stop you if you try to harm me, but now the matter is much less certain. So what will you do? Must we fight now, or can we talk? Jean shook; the urge to take her at her word, to smash her down, was rising hot and red within him. He would have to strike as fast as he ever had in his life, as hard as muscle and sinew could allow. Break her skull, throttle her, bear her down beneath his full weight, and pray to the gods he did enough damage to postpone whatever word or gesture she would utter in return. They stood there for a long, tense moment, perfectly still, with her dark eyes meeting his unblinkingly. Then his right hand darted up and closed around her left wrist, savagely tight. He could feel thin bones under thin skin, and he knew that one good sharp twist--The woman flinched. Real fear shone out from the depths of those eyes, the briefest flash before her vast self--possession rolled in again like resurging waters to drown her human weakness. But it had been there, genuine as the flesh beneath his fingers. Jean loosened his grip, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. I'll be damned, he said. I don't think you're lying. This is very important, she whispered. Jean kept his right hand where it was, and reached up with his left to push back the silver lace that sprouted from her jacket cuff. Black rings were tattooed around her wrist, precise lines on pale skin. Five rings, said Locke. All I ever heard was that more is better. Just how many can one of you people have, anyway? This many, said the woman with a hint of a smirk. Jean released her arm and took a step back. She held her left hand up beside her head and stroked the tattoos gently with the fingers of her other hand. The blackness became silver, rippling silver, as though she wore bracelets of liquid moonlight. As he stared at the eerie glow, Jean felt a cold itch behind his eyes, and a hard pressure against the fingertips of his right hand. Reeling, he saw images flash in his mind--fold upon fold of pale silk, needles punching in and out of delicate lace, the rough edge of a cloth unraveling into threads--the pressure on his fingers was an actual needle, moving up and down, in an endless steady dance across the cloth... .Oh, he muttered, putting a hand to his forehead as the sensations receded. What the hell was that? Me, said the woman. In a manner of speaking. Have you ever recalled someone by the scent of their tobacco, or a perfume, or the feel of their skin? Deep memories without words? Yeah, said Locke, massaging his temples. Jean guessed that he'd somehow shared the brief vision. In my society, we speak mind to mind. We... announce ourselves using such impressions. We construct images of certain memories or passions. We call them sigils. She hitched her laced sleeve back up over her wrist, where the black rings had entirely lost their ghostly gleam, and smiled. Now that I've shared mine with you, you're less likely to jump out of your skin if I ever need to speak mind to mind, rather than voice to ear. What the hell are you? said Jean. There are four of us, said the woman. In an ideal world, the wisest and most powerful of the fifth--circles. If nothing else, we do get to live in the biggest houses. You rule the Bondsmagi, said Locke, incredulously. Rule is too strong a term. We do occasionally manage to avert total chaos. You have a name? Patience. What, you have some rule against telling us now? No, it's what I'm called. Patience. No shit? Your peers must think pretty highly of you. It doesn't mean anything, any more than a girl named Violet needs to be purple. It's a title. Archedama Patience. So, have we decided that nobody's going to be murdering anyone here? I suppose that depends on what you want to talk about, said Jean. The pair of you, said Patience. I've been minding your business for some time now. Starting with the fragments I could pull out of the Falconers' memories. Our agents retrieved his possessions from Camorr after he was... crippled. Among them a knife formerly belonging to one of the Anatolius sisters. A knife with my blood on it, said Jean. From that we had your trail easily enough. And from that you fucked up our lives. I need you to understand, said Patience, just how little you understand. I saved your lives in Tal Verrar. Funny, I don't

recall seeing you there, said Jean. The Falconer has friends, said Patience. Cohorts, followers, tools. For all of his flaws he was very popular. You saw their parlor tricks in the Night Market, but that was all I permitted.

Without my intervention, they would have killed you. You can call that mess parlor tricks, said Jean. That interference in Tal Verrar still made a hell of a problem for us. Better than death, surely, said Patience. And kinder by far than I might have been, given the circumstances. Circumstances? The Falconer was arrogant, vicious, misguided. He was acting in obedience to a contract, which we consider a sacred obligation, but I wont deny that he amplified the brutality of the affair beyond what was called for. He was going to help turn

hundreds of people into empty shells. Into gods--damned furniture. That wasnt brutal enough? said Jean. They were part of the contract. You and your friends were not. Well, if this is some sort of apology, go to hell, said Locke, coughing. I dont care what a humane old witch you think you are, and I dont care how or why the Falconer went wrong in the head. If Id had more time I would have used every second of it to bleed him. All he got was the thinnest shred of what he really deserved. Thats more true than you know, Locke.

Oh, so much truer than you know. Patience folded her hands together and sighed. And no one comprehends it quite as well as I do. After all, the Falconer is my son. *Revue de presse* PRAISE FOR SCOTT LYNCH A bright new voice in the fantasy genre. George R. R. Martin *The Republic of Thieves* Fast paced, fun, and impossible to put down . . . Locke and company remain among the most engaging protagonists in

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