

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE SILENT BLADE
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK XI
RA
SALVATORE



Wulfgar lay back in his bed, pondering, trying to come to terms with the abrupt changes that had come over his life. Rescued from the demon Errtu and his hellish prison in the Abyss, the proud barbarian found himself once again among friends and allies. Bruenor, his adopted dwarven father, was here, and so was Drizzt, his dark elven mentor and dearest friend. Wulfgar could tell from the snoring that Regis, the chubby halfling, was sleeping contentedly in the next room.

PROLOGUE

And Catti-brie, dear Catti-brie, the woman Wulfgar had come to love those years before, the woman whom he had planned to marry seven years previously in Mithral Hall. They were all here at their home in Icewind Dale, reunited and presumably at peace, through the heroic efforts of these wonderful friends.

Wulfgar did not know what that meant.

Wulfgar, who had been through such a terrible ordeal over six years of torture at the clawed hands of the demon Errtu, did not understand.

The huge man crossed his arms over his chest. Sheer exhaustion put him in bed, forced him down, for he would not willingly choose sleep. Errtu found him in his dreams.

And so it was this night. Wulfgar, though deep in thought and deep in turmoil, succumbed to his exhaustion and fell into a peaceful blackness that soon turned again into the images of the swirling gray mists that were the Abyss. There sat the gigantic, bat-winged Errtu, perched upon his carved

mushroom throne, laughing. Always laughing that hideous croaking chuckle. That laugh was borne not out of joy, but was rather a mocking thing, an insult to those the demon chose to torture. Now the beast aimed that unending wickedness at Wulfgar, as was aimed the huge pincer of Bizmatec, another demon, minion of Errtu. With strength beyond the bounds of almost any other human, Wulfgar ferociously wrestled Bizmatec. The barbarian batted aside the huge, humanlike arms and the two other upper-body appendages, the pincer arms, for a long while, slapping and punching desperately.

But too many flailing limbs came at him. Bizmatec was too large and too strong, and the mighty barbarian eventually began to tire.

It ended—always it ended—with one of Bizmatec’s pincers around Wulfgar’s throat, the demon’s other pincer arm and its two humanlike arms holding the defeated human steady. Expert in this, his favorite torturing technique, Bizmatec pressed oh so subtly on Wulfgar’s throat, took away the air, then gave it back, over and over, leaving the man weak in the legs, gasping and gasping as minutes, then hours, slipped past.

Wulfgar sat up straight in his bed, clutching at his throat, clawing a scratch down one side of it before he realized that the demon was not there, that he was safe in his bed in the land he called home, surrounded by his friends.

Friends . . .

What did that word mean? What could they know

of his torment? How could they help him chase away the enduring nightmare that was Errtu?

The haunted man did not sleep the rest of the night, and when Drizzt came to rouse him, well before the dawn, the dark elf found Wulfgar already dressed for the road. They were to leave this day, all five, bearing the artifact Crenshinibon far, far to the south and west. They were bound for Caradoon on the banks of Impresk Lake, and then into the Snowflake Mountains to a great monastery called Spirit Soaring where a priest named Cadderly would destroy the wicked relic.

Crenshinibon. Drizzt had it with him when he came to get Wulfgar that morning. The drow didn't wear it openly, but Wulfgar knew it was there. He could sense it, could feel its vile presence. For Crenshinibon remained linked to its last master, the demon Errtu. It tingled with the energy of the demon, and because Drizzt had it on him and was standing so close, Errtu, too, remained close to Wulfgar.

"A fine day for the road," the drow remarked lightheartedly, but his tone was strained, condescending, Wulfgar noted. With more than a little difficulty, Wulfgar resisted the urge to punch Drizzt in the face.

Instead, he grunted in reply and strode past the deceptively small dark elf. Drizzt was but a few inches over five feet, while Wulfgar towered closer to seven feet than to six, and carried fully twice the weight of the drow. The barbarian's thigh was thicker than Drizzt's waist, and yet, if it came to blows between them, wise bettors would favor the drow.

“I have not yet wakened Catti-brie,” Drizzt explained.

Wulfgar turned fast at the mention of the name. He stared hard into the drow’s lavender eyes, his own blue orbs matching the intensity that always seemed to be there.

“But Regis is already awake and at his morning meal—he is hoping to get two or three breakfasts in before we leave, no doubt,” Drizzt added with a chuckle, one that Wulfgar did not share. “And Bruenor will meet us on the field beyond Bryn Shander’s eastern gate. He is with his own folk, preparing the priestess Stumpet to lead the clan in his absence.”

Wulfgar only half heard the words. They meant nothing to him. All the world meant nothing to him.

“Shall we rouse Catti-brie?” the drow asked.

“I will,” Wulfgar answered gruffly. “You see to Regis. If he gets a belly full of food, he will surely slow us down, and I mean to be quick to your friend Cadderly, that we might be rid of Crenshinibon.”

Drizzt started to answer, but Wulfgar turned away, moving down the hall to Catti-brie’s door. He gave a single, thunderous knock, then pushed right through. Drizzt moved a step in that direction to scold the barbarian for his rude behavior—the woman had not even acknowledged his knock, after all—but he let it go. Of all the humans the drow had ever met, Catti-brie ranked as the most capable at defending herself from insult or violence.

Besides, Drizzt knew that his desire to go and scold

Wulfgar was wrought more than a bit by his jealousy of the man who once was, and perhaps was soon again, to be Catti-brie's husband.

The drow stroked a hand over his handsome face and turned to find Regis.



Wearing only a slight undergarment and with her pants half pulled up, the startled Catti-brie turned a surprised look on Wulfgar as he strode into her room. "Ye might've waited for an answer," she said dryly, brushing away her embarrassment and pulling her pants up, then going to retrieve her tunic.

Wulfgar nodded and held up his hands—only half an apology, perhaps, but a half more than Catti-brie had expected. She saw the pain in the man's sky blue eyes and the emptiness of his occasional strained smiles. She had talked with Drizzt about it at length, and with Bruenor and Regis, and they had all decided to be patient. Time alone could heal Wulfgar's wounds.

"The drow has prepared a morning meal for us all," Wulfgar explained. "We should eat well before we start on the long road."

" 'The drow'? " Catti-brie echoed. She hadn't meant to speak it aloud, but so dumbfounded was she by Wulfgar's distant reference to Drizzt that the words just slipped out. Would Wulfgar call Bruenor "the dwarf"? And how long would it be before she became simply "the girl"? Catti-brie blew a deep sigh

and pulled her tunic over her shoulders, reminding herself pointedly that Wulfgar had been through hell—literally. She looked at him now, studying those eyes, and saw a hint of embarrassment there, as though her echo of his callous reference to Drizzt had indeed struck him in the heart. That was a good sign.

He turned to leave her room, but she moved to him, reaching up to gently stroke the side of his face, her hand running down his smooth cheek to the scratchy beard that he had either decided to grow or simply hadn't been motivated enough to shave.

Wulfgar looked down at her, at the tenderness in her eyes, and for the first time since the fight on the ice floe when he and his friends had dispatched wicked Errtu, there came a measure of honesty in his slight smile.



Regis did get his three meals, and he grumbled about it all that morning as the five friends started out from Bryn Shander, the largest of the villages in the region called Ten Towns in forlorn Icedwind Dale. Their course was north at first, moving to easier ground, and then turning due west. To the north, far in the distance, they saw the high structures of Targos, second city of the region, and beyond the city's roofs could be seen shining waters of Maer Dualdon.

By mid-afternoon, with more than a dozen miles behind them, they came to the banks of the Shaengarne,

the great river swollen and running fast with the spring melt. They followed it north, back to Maer Dualdon, to the town of Bremen and a waiting boat Regis had arranged.

Gently refusing the many offers from townsfolk to remain in the village for supper and a warm bed, and over the many protests of Regis, who claimed that he was famished and ready to lay down and die, the friends were soon west of the river, running on again, leaving the towns, their home, behind.

Drizzt could hardly believe that they had set out so soon. Wulfgar had only recently been returned to them. All of them were together once more in the land they called their home, at peace, and yet, here they were, heeding again the call of duty and running down the road to adventure. The drow had the cowl of his traveling cloak pulled low about his face, shielding his sensitive eyes from the stinging sun.

Thus his friends could not see his wide smile.



PART ONE

Often I sit and ponder the turmoil I feel when my blades are at rest, when all the world around me seems at peace. This is the supposed ideal for which I strive, the calm that we all hope will eventually return to us when we are at war, and yet, in these peaceful times—

APATHY

and they have been rare occurrences indeed in the more than seven decades of my life—I do not feel as if I have found perfection, but, rather, as if something is missing from my life.

It seems such an incongruous notion, and yet I have come to know that I am a warrior, a creature of action. In those times when there is no pressing need for action, I am not at ease. Not at all.

When the road is not filled with adventure, when there are no monsters to battle and no mountains to climb, boredom finds me. I have come to accept this truth of my life, this truth

about who I am, and so, on those rare, empty occasions I can find a way to defeat the boredom. I can find a mountain peak higher than the last I climbed.

I see many of the same symptoms now in Wulfgar, returned to us from the grave, from the swirling darkness that was Errtu's corner of the Abyss. But I fear that Wulfgar's state has transcended simple boredom, spilling into the realm of apathy. Wulfgar, too, was a creature of action, but that doesn't seem to be the cure for his lethargy or his apathy. His own people now call out to him, begging action. They have asked him to assume leadership of the tribes. Even stubborn Berkthgar, who would have to give up that coveted position of rulership, supports Wulfgar. He and all the rest of them know, at this tenuous time, that above all others Wulfgar, son of Beornegar, could bring great gains to the nomadic barbarians of Icewind Dale.

Wulfgar will not heed that call. It is neither humility nor weariness stopping him, I recognize, nor any fears that he cannot handle the position or live up to the expectations of those begging him. Any of those problems could be overcome, could be reasoned through or supported by Wulfgar's friends, myself included. But, no, it is none of those rectifiable things.

It is simply that he does not care.

Could it be that his own agonies at the clawed hands of Errtu were so great and so enduring that he has lost his ability to empathize

with the pain of others? Has he seen too much horror, too much agony, to hear their cries?

I fear this above all else, for it is a loss that knows no precise cure. And yet, to be honest, I see it clearly etched in Wulfgar's features, a state of self-absorption where too many memories of his own recent horrors cloud his vision. Perhaps he does not even recognize someone else's pain. Or perhaps, if he does see it, he dismisses it as trivial next to the monumental trials he suffered for those six years as Errtu's prisoner. Loss of empathy might well be the most enduring and deep-cutting scar of all, the silent blade of an unseen enemy, tearing at our hearts and stealing more than our strength. Stealing our will, for what are we without empathy? What manner of joy might we find in our lives if we cannot understand the joys and pains of those around us, if we cannot share in a greater community? I remember my years in the Underdark after I ran out of Menzoberranzan. Alone, save the occasional visits from Guenhwyvar, I survived those long years through my own imagination.

I am not certain that Wulfgar even has that capacity left to him, for imagination requires introspection, a reaching within one's thoughts, and I fear that every time my friend so looks inward, all he sees are the minions of Errtu, the sludge and horrors of the Abyss.

He is surrounded by friends, who love him and will try with all their hearts to support him and help him climb out of Errtu's

emotional dungeon. Perhaps Catti-brie, the woman he once loved—and perhaps still does love—so deeply, will prove pivotal to his recovery. It pains me to watch them together, I admit. She treats Wulfgar with such tenderness and compassion, but I know that he feels not her gentle touch. Better that she slap his face, eye him sternly, and show him the truth of his lethargy. I know this and yet I cannot tell her to do so, for their relationship is much more complicated than that. I have nothing but Wulfgar's best interests in my mind and my heart now, and yet, if I showed Catti-brie a way that seemed less than compassionate, it could be, and would be—by Wulfgar at least, in his present state of mind—construed as the interference of a jealous suitor.

Not true. For though I do not know Catti-brie's honest feelings toward this man who once was to be her husband—for she has become quite guarded with her feelings of late—I do recognize that Wulfgar is not capable of love at this time.

Not capable of love . . . are there any sadder words to describe a man? I think not, and wish that I could now assess Wulfgar's state of mind differently. But love, honest love, requires empathy. It is a sharing—of joy, of pain, of laughter, and of tears. Honest love makes one's soul a reflection of the partner's moods. And as a room seems larger when it is lined with mirrors, so do the joys become amplified. And as the individual items within the mirrored

room seem less acute, so does pain diminish and fade, stretched thin by the sharing.

That is the beauty of love, whether in passion or friendship. A sharing that multiplies the joys and thins the pains. Wulfgar is surrounded now by friends, all willing to engage in such sharing, as it once was between us. Yet he cannot so engage us, cannot let loose those guards that he necessarily put in place when surrounded by the likes of Errtu.

He has lost his empathy. I can only pray that he will find it again, that time will allow him to open his heart and soul to those deserving, for without empathy he will find no purpose. Without purpose, he will find no satisfaction. Without satisfaction, he will find no contentment, and without contentment, he will find no joy.

And we, all of us, will have no way to help him.

—Drizzt Do'Urden



I

A STRANGER AT HOME

Artemis Entreri stood on a rocky hill overlooking the vast, dusty city, trying to sort through the myriad feelings that swirled within him. He reached up to wipe the blowing dust and sand from his lips and from the hairs of his newly grown goatee. Only as he wiped it did he realize that he hadn't shaved the rest of his face in several days, for now the small beard, instead of standing distinct upon his face, fell to ragged edges across his cheeks.

Entreri didn't care.

The wind pulled many strands of his long hair from the tie at the back of his head, the wayward lengths slapping across his face, stinging his dark eyes.

Entreri didn't care.

He just stared down at Calimport and tried hard to stare inside himself. The man had lived nearly two-thirds of his life in the sprawling city on the southern coast, had come to prominence as a warrior and a killer there. It was the only place that he could ever really call home. Looking down on it now, brown and dusty, the relentless desert sun flashed brilliantly off the white marble of the greater homes. It also illuminated the many hovels, shacks, and torn tents set along roads—muddy roads only because they had no proper sewers for drainage. Looking



down on Calimport now, the returning assassin didn't know how to feel. Once, he had known his place in the world. He had reached the pinnacle of his nefarious profession, and any who spoke his name did so with reverence and fear. When a pasha hired Artemis Entreri to kill a man, that man was soon dead. Without exception. And despite the many enemies he had obviously made, the assassin had been able to walk the streets of Calimport openly, not from shadow to shadow, in all confidence that none would be bold enough to act against him.

No one would dare shoot an arrow at Artemis Entreri, for they would know that the single shot must be perfect, must finish this man who seemed above the antics of mere mortals, else he would then come looking for them. And he would find them, and he would kill them.

A movement to the side, the slight shift of a shadow, caught Entreri's attention. He shook his head and sighed, not really surprised, when a cloaked figure leaped out from the rocks, some twenty feet ahead of him and stood blocking the path, arms crossed over his burly chest.

"Going to Calimport?" the man asked, his voice thick with a southern accent.

Entreri didn't answer, just kept his head straight ahead, though his eyes darted to the many rocks lining both sides of the trail.

"You must pay for the passage," the burly man went on. "I am your guide." With that he bowed and came up showing a toothless grin.

Entreri had heard many tales of this common game of money through intimidation, though never before had one been bold enough to block his way. Yes, indeed, he realized, he had been gone a long time. Still he didn't answer, and the burly man shifted, throwing wide his cloak to reveal a sword under his belt.

"How many coins do you offer?" the man asked.

Entreri started to tell him to move aside but changed his mind and only sighed again.

"Deaf?" said the man, and he drew out his sword and advanced yet another step. "You pay me, or me and my friends will take the coins from your torn body."

Entreri didn't reply, didn't move, didn't draw his jeweled dagger, his only weapon. He just stood there, and his ambivalence seemed to anger the burly man all the more.

The man glanced to the side—to Entreri's left—just slightly, but the assassin caught the look clearly. He followed it to one of the robber's companions, holding a bow in the shadows between two huge rocks.

"Now," said the burly man. "Last chance for you."

Entreri quietly hooked his toe under a rock, but made no movement other than that. He stood waiting, staring at the burly man, but with the archer on the edge of his vision. So well could the assassin read the movements of men, the slightest muscle twitch, the blink of an eye, that it was he who moved first. Entreri leaped out diagonally, ahead and to the left, rolling over and kicking out with his right foot. He launched the stone the archer's way, not to hit the man—that would have been above the skill even of Artemis Entreri—but in the hopes of distracting him. As he came over into the somersault, the assassin let his cloak fly wildly, hoping it might catch and slow the arrow.

He needn't have worried, for the archer missed badly and would have even if Entreri hadn't moved at all.

Coming up from the roll, Entreri set his feet and squared himself to the charging swordsmen, aware also that two other men were coming over the rocks at either side of the trail.

Still showing no weapon, Entreri unexpectedly charged ahead, ducking the swipe of the sword at the last possible instant, then came up hard behind the swishing blade, one hand catching the attacker's chin, the other snapping behind the man's head, grabbing his hair. A twist and turn flipped the swordsman on the ground. Entreri let go, running his hand up the man's weapon arm to fend off any attempted attacks. The man went down on his back hard. At that moment Entreri stomped down on his throat. The man's grasp on the sword weakened, almost as if he were handing the weapon to Entreri.

The assassin leaped away, not wanting to get his feet tangled as the other two came in, one straight ahead, the other from behind. Out



flashed Entreri's sword, a straight left-handed thrust, followed by a dazzling, rolling stab. The man easily stepped back out of Entreri's reach, but the attack hadn't been designed to score a hit anyway. Entreri flipped the sword to his right hand, an overhand grip, then stepped back suddenly, so suddenly, turning his hand and the blade. He brought it across his body, then stabbed it out behind him. The assassin felt the tip enter the man's chest and heard the gasp of air as he sliced a lung.

Instinct alone had Entreri spinning, turning to the right and keeping the attacker impaled. He brought the man about as a shield against the archer, who did indeed fire again. But again, the man missed badly, and this time the arrow burrowed into the ground several feet in front of Entreri.

"Idiot," the assassin muttered, and with a sudden jerk, he dropped his latest victim to the dirt, bringing the sword about in the same fluid movement. So brilliantly had he executed the maneuver that the remaining swordsman finally understood his folly, turned about, and fled.

Entreri spun again, threw the sword in the general direction of the archer, and bolted for cover.

A long moment slipped past.

"Where is he?" the archer called out, obvious fear and frustration in his voice. "Merk, do you see him?"

Another long moment passed.

"Where is he?" the archer cried again, growing frantic. "Merk, where is he?"

"Right behind you," came a whisper. A jeweled dagger flashed, slicing the bowstring and then, before the stunned man could begin to react, resting against the front of his throat.

"Please," the man stammered, trembling so badly that his movements, not Entreri's, caused the first nick from that fine blade. "I have children, yes. Many, many children. Seventeen . . ."

He ended in a gurgle as Entreri cut him from ear to ear, bringing his foot up against the man's back even as he did, then kicking him facedown to the ground.

“Then you should have chosen a safer career,” Entreri answered, though the man could not hear.

Peering out from the rocks, the assassin soon spotted the fourth of the group, moving from shadow to shadow across the way. The man was obviously heading for Calimport but was simply too scared to jump out and run in the open. Entreri knew that he could catch the man, or perhaps re-string the bow and take him down from this spot. But he didn’t, for he hardly cared. Not even bothering to search the bodies for loot, Entreri wiped and sheathed his magical dagger and moved back onto the road. Yes, he had been gone a long, long time.

Before he had left this city, Artemis Entreri had known his place in the world and in Calimport. He thought of that now, staring at the city after an absence of several years. He understood the shadowy world he had inhabited and realized that many changes had likely taken place in those alleys. Old associates would be gone, and his reputation would not likely carry him through the initial meetings with the new, often self-proclaimed leaders of the various guilds and sects.

“What have you done to me, Drizzt Do’Urden?” he asked with a chuckle, for this great change in the life of Artemis Entreri had begun when a certain Pasha Pook had sent him on a mission to retrieve a magical ruby pendant from a runaway halfling. An easy enough task, Entreri had believed. The halfling, Regis, was known to the assassin and should not have proven a difficult adversary.

Little did Entreri know at that time that Regis had done a marvelously cunning job of surrounding himself with powerful allies, particularly the dark elf. How many years had it been, Entreri pondered, since he had first encountered Drizzt Do’Urden? Since he had first met his warrior equal, who could rightly hold a mirror up to Entreri and show the lie that was his existence? Nearly a decade, he realized, and while he had grown older and perhaps a bit slower, the drow elf, who might live six centuries, had aged not at all.

Yes, Drizzt had started Entreri on a path of dangerous introspection. The blackness had only been amplified when Entreri had gone after Drizzt



again, along with the remnants of the drow's family. Drizzt had beaten Entreri on a high ledge outside Mithral Hall, and the assassin would have died, except that an opportunistic dark elf by the name of Jarlaxle had rescued him. Jarlaxle had then taken him to Menzoberranzan, the vast city of the drow, the stronghold of Lolth, Demon Queen of Chaos. The human assassin had found a different standing down there in a city of intrigue and brutality. There, everyone was an assassin, and Entreri, despite his tremendous talents at the murderous art, was only human, a fact that relegated him to the bottom of the social ladder.

But it was more than simple perceptual standing that had struck the assassin profoundly during his stay in the city of drow. It was the realization of the emptiness of his existence. There, in a city full of Entreris, he had come to recognize the folly of his confidence, of his ridiculous notion that his passionless dedication to pure fighting skill had somehow elevated him above the rabble. He knew that now, looking down at Calimport, at the city he had known as a home, at his last refuge, it seemed, in all the world.

In dark and mysterious Menzoberranzan, Artemis Entreri had been humbled.

As he made his way to the distant city, Entreri wondered many times if he truly desired this return. His first days would be perilous, he knew, but it was not fear for the end of his life that brought a hesitance to his normally cocky stride. It was fear of continuing his life.

Outwardly, little had changed in Calimport—the town of a million beggars, Entreri liked to call it. True to form, he passed by dozens of pitiful wretches, lying in rags, or naked, along the sides of the road, most of them likely in the same spot the city guards had thrown them that morning, clearing the way for the gilded carriages of the important merchants. They reached toward Entreri with trembling, bony fingers, arms so weak and emaciated that they could not hold them up for even the few seconds it took the heartless man to stride past them.

Where to go? he wondered. His old employer, Pasha Pook, was long dead, the victim of Drizzt's powerful panther companion after Entreri

had done as the man had bade him and returned Regis and the ruby pendant. Entreri had not remained in the city for long after that unfortunate incident, for he had brought Regis in and that had led to the demise of a powerful figure, ultimately a black stain on Entreri's record among his less-than-merciful associates. He could have mended the situation, probably quite easily, by simply offering his normally invaluable services to another powerful guildmaster or pasha, but he had chosen the road. Entreri had been bent on revenge against Drizzt, not for the killing of Pook—the assassin cared little about that—but because he and Drizzt had battled fiercely without conclusion in the city's sewers, a fight that Entreri still believed he should have won.

Walking along the dirty streets of Calimport now, he had to wonder what reputation he had left behind. Certainly many other assassins would have spoken ill of him in his absence, would have exaggerated Entreri's failure in the Regis incident in order to strengthen their own positions within the gutter pecking order.

Entreri smiled as he considered the fact, and he knew it to be fact, that those ill words against him would have been spoken in whispers only. Even in his absence, those other killers would fear retribution. Perhaps he didn't know his place in the world any longer. Perhaps Menzoberranzan had held a dark . . . no, not dark, but merely empty mirror before his eyes, but he could not deny that he still enjoyed the respect.

Respect he might have to earn yet again, he pointedly reminded himself.

As he moved along the familiar streets, more and more memories came back to him. He knew where most of the guild houses had been located, and suspected that, unless there had been some ambitious purge by the lawful leaders of the city, many still stood intact, and probably brimming with the associates he had once known. Pook's house had been shaken to the core by the killing of the wretched pasha and, subsequently, by the appointment of the lazy halfling Regis as Pook's successor. Entreri had taken care of that minor problem by taking care of Regis, and yet, despite the chaos imposed upon that house, when Entreri had gone north with the halfling in tow, the



house of Pook had survived. Perhaps it still stood, though the assassin could only guess as to who might be ruling it now.

That would have been a logical place for Entreri to go and rebuild his base of power within the city, but he simply shrugged and walked past the side avenue that would lead to it. He thought he was merely wandering aimlessly, but soon enough he came to another familiar region and realized that he had subconsciously aimed for this area, perhaps in an effort to regain his heart.

These were the streets where a young Artemis Entreri had first made his mark in Calimport, where he, barely a teenager, had defeated all challengers to his supremacy, where he had battled the man sent by Theebles Royuset, the lieutenant in powerful Pasha Basadoni's guild. Entreri had killed that thug and had later killed ugly Theebles, the clever murder moving him into Basadoni's generous favor. He had become a lieutenant in one of the most powerful guilds of Calimport, of all of Calimshan, at the tender age of fourteen.

But now he hardly cared, and recalling the story did not even bring the slightest hint of a smile to his face.

He thought back further, to the torment that had landed him here in the first place, trials too great for a boy to overcome, deception and betrayal by everyone he had known and trusted, most pointedly his own father. Still, he didn't care, couldn't even feel the pain any longer. It was meaningless, emptiness, without merit or point.

He saw a woman in the shadows of one hovel, hanging washed clothes to dry. She shifted deeper into the shadows, obviously wary. He understood her concern, for he was a stranger here, dressed too richly with his thick, well-stitched traveling cloak to belong in the shanty town. Strangers in these brutal places usually brought danger.

"From there to there," came a call, the voice of a young man, full of pride and edged with fear. Entreri turned slowly to see the youth, a tall and gangly lad, holding a club laced with spikes, swinging it nervously.

Entreri stared at him hard, seeing himself in the boy's face. No, not himself, he realized, for this one was too obviously nervous. This one would likely not survive for long.

“From there to there!” the boy said more loudly, pointing with his free hand to the end of the street where Entreri had entered, to the far end, where the assassin had been going.

“Your pardon, young master,” Entreri said, dipping a slight bow, and feeling, as he did, his jeweled dagger, set on his belt under the folds of his cloak. A flick of his wrist could easily propel that dagger the fifteen feet, past the awkward youth’s defenses and deep into his throat.

“Master,” the lad echoed, his tone as much that of an incredulous question as an assertion. “Yes, master,” he decided, apparently liking the title. “Master of this street, of all these streets, and none walk them without the permission of Taddio.” As he finished, he prodded his thumb repeatedly into his chest.

Entreri straightened, and for just an instant, death flashed across his black eyes and the words “dead master” echoed through his thoughts. The lad had just challenged him, and the Artemis Entreri of a few years previous, a man who accepted and conquered all challenges, would have simply destroyed the youth where he stood.

But now that flash of pride whisked by, leaving Entreri unfazed and uninsulted. He gave a resigned sigh, wondering if he would find yet another stupid fight this day. And for what? he wondered, facing this pitiful, confused little boy on an empty street over which no rational person would even deign to claim ownership. “I begged you pardon, young master,” he said calmly. “I did not know, for I am new to the region and ignorant of your customs.”

“Then you should learn!” the lad replied angrily, gaining courage in Entreri’s submissive response and coming forward a couple of strong strides.

Entreri shook his head, his hand starting for the dagger, but going, instead to his belt purse. He pulled out a gold coin and tossed it to the feet of the strutting youth.

The boy, who drank from sewers and ate the scraps he could rummage from the alleys behind the merchant houses, could not hide his surprise and awe at such a treasure. He regained his composure a moment later, though,

and looked back at Entreri with a superior posture. “It is not enough,” he said.

Entreri threw out another gold coin, and a silver. “That is all that I have, young master,” he said, holding his hands out wide.

“If I search you and learn differently . . .” the lad threatened.

Entreri sighed again, and decided that if the youth approached he would kill him quickly and mercifully.

The boy bent and scooped up the three coins. “If you come back to the domain of Taddio, have with you more coins,” he declared. “I warn you. Now begone! Out the same end of the street you entered!”

Entreri looked back the way he had come. In truth, one direction seemed as good as any other to him at that time, so he gave a slight bow and walked back, out of the domain of Taddio, who had no idea how lucky he had been this day.



The building stood three full stories and, decorated with elaborate sculptures and shining marble, was truly the most impressive abode of all the thieving guilds. Normally such shadowy figures tried to keep a low profile, living in houses that seemed unremarkable from the outside, though they were, in truth, palatial within. Not so with the house of Pasha Basadoni. The old man—and he was ancient now, closer to ninety than to eighty—enjoyed his luxuries, and enjoyed showing the power and splendor of his guild to all who would look.

In a large chamber in the middle of the second floor, the gathering room for Basadoni’s principle commanders, the two men and one woman who truly operated the day-to-day activities of the extensive guild entertained a young street thug. He was more a boy than a man, an unimpressive figure held in power by the backing of Pasha Basadoni and surely not by his own wiles.

“At least he is loyal,” remarked Hand, a quiet and subtle thief, the master of shadows, when Taddio left them. “Two gold pieces and one silver—no small take for one working that gutter section.”

“If that is all he received from his visitor,” Sharlotta Vespers answered with a dismissive chuckle. Sharlotta stood tallest of the three captains, an inch above six feet, her body slender, her movements graceful—so graceful that Pasha Basadoni had nicknamed her his “Willow Tree.” It was no secret that Basadoni had taken Sharlotta as his lover and still used her in that manner on those rare occasions when his old body was up to the task. It was common knowledge that Sharlotta had used those liaisons to her benefit and had climbed the ranks through Basadoni’s bed. She willingly admitted as much, usually just before she killed the man or woman who had complained about it. A shake of her head sent waist-length black hair flipping back over one shoulder, so that Hand could see her wry expression clearly.

“If Taddio had received more, then he would have delivered more,” Hand assured her, his tone, despite his anger, revealing that hint of frustration he and their other companion, Kadran Gordeon, always felt when dealing with the condescending Sharlotta. Hand ruled the quiet services of Basadoni’s operation, the pickpockets and the prostitutes who worked the market, while Kadran Gordeon dealt with the soldiers of the street army. But Sharlotta, the Willow Tree, had Basadoni’s ear above them all. She served as the principal attendant of the Pasha and as the voice of the now little seen old man.

When Basadoni finally died, these three would fight for control, no doubt, and while those who understood only the peripheral truths of the guild would likely favor the brash and loud Kadran Gordeon, those, such as Hand, who had a better feeling for the true inner workings, understood that Sharlotta Vespers had already taken many, many steps to secure and strengthen her position with or without the specter of Basadoni looming over them.

“How many words will we waste on the workings of a boy?” Kadran Gordeon complained. “Three new merchants have set up kiosks in the market a stone’s throw from our house without our permission. That is the more important matter, the one requiring our full attention.”

“We have already talked it through,” Sharlotta replied. “You want us to



give you permission to send out your soldiers, perhaps even a battle-mage, to teach the merchants better. You will not get that from us at this time.”

“If we wait for Pasha Basadoni to finally speak on this matter, other merchants will come to the belief that they, too, need not pay us for the privilege of operating within the boundaries of our protective zone.” He turned to Hand, the small man often his ally in arguments with Sharlotta. But the thief was obviously distracted, staring down at one of the coins the boy Taddio had given to him. Sensing that he was being watched, Hand looked up at the other two.

“What is it?” Kadran prompted.

“I’ve not seen one like this,” Hand explained, flipping the coin to the burly man.

Kadran caught it and quickly examined it, then, with a surprised expression, handed it over to Sharlotta. “Nor have I seen one with this stamp,” he admitted. “Not of the city, I believe, nor of anywhere in Calimshan.”

Sharlotta studied the coin carefully, a flicker of recognition coming to her striking light green eyes. “The crescent moon,” she remarked, then flipped it over. “Profile of a unicorn. This is a coin from the region of Silverymoon.”

The other two looked to each, surprised, as was Sharlotta, by the revelation. “Silverymoon?” Kadran echoed incredulously.

“A city far to the north, east of Waterdeep,” Sharlotta replied.

“I know where Silverymoon lies,” Kadran replied dryly. “The domain of Lady Alustriel, I believe. That is not what I find surprising.”

“Why would a merchant, if it was a merchant, of Silverymoon find himself walking in Taddio’s worthless shanty town?” Hand asked, echoing Kadran’s suspicions perfectly.

“Indeed, I thought it curious that anyone carrying such a treasure of more than two gold pieces would be in that region,” Kadran agreed, pursing his lips and twisting his mouth in his customary manner that sent one side of his long and curvy mustache up far higher than the other, giving his whole dark face an unbalanced appearance. “Now it seems to have become more curious by far.”

“A man who wandered into Calimport probably came in through the docks,” Hand reasoned, “and found himself lost in the myriad of streets and smells. So much of the city looks the same, after all. It would not be difficult for a foreigner to wander wayward.”

“I do not believe in coincidences,” Sharlotta replied. She tossed the coin back to Hand. “Take it to one of our wizard associates—Giunta the Diviner will suffice. Perhaps there remains enough of a trace of the previous owner’s identity upon the coins that Giunta can locate him.”

“It seems a tremendous effort for one too afraid of the boy to even refuse payment,” Hand replied.

“I do not believe in coincidences,” Sharlotta repeated. “I do not believe that anyone could be so intimidated by that pitiful Taddio, unless it is someone who knows that he works as a front for Pasha Basadoni. And I do not like the idea that one so knowledgeable of our operation took it upon himself to wander into our territory unannounced. Was he, perhaps, looking for something? Seeking a weakness?”

“You presume much,” Kadran put in.

“Only where danger is concerned,” Sharlotta retorted. “I consider every person an enemy until he has proven himself differently, and I find that in knowing my enemies, I can prepare against anything they might send against me.”

There was little mistaking the irony of her words, aimed as they were at Kadran Gordeon, but even the dangerous soldier had to nod his agreement with Sharlotta’s perception and precaution. It wasn’t every day that a merchant bearing coins from far away Silverymoon wandered into one of Calimport’s desolate shanty towns.



He knew this house better than any in all the city. Within those brown, unremarkable walls, within the wrapper of a common warehouse, hung golden-stitched tapestries and magnificent weapons. Beyond the always barred side door, where an old beggar now huddled for meager shelter, lay a



room of beautiful dancing ladies, all swirling veils and alluring perfumes, warm baths in scented water, and cuisine delicacies from every corner of the Realms.

This house had belonged to Pasha Pook. After his demise, it had been given by Entreri's archenemy to Regis the halfling, who had ruled briefly, until Entreri had decided the little fool had ruled long enough. When Entreri had left Calimport with Regis, the last time he had seen the dusty city, the house was in disarray, with several factions fighting for power. He suspected that Quentin Bodeau, a veteran burglar with more than twenty years' experience in the guild, had won the fight. What he didn't know, given the confusion and outrage within the ranks, was whether the fight had been worth winning. Perhaps another guild had moved into the territory. Perhaps the inside of this brown warehouse was now as unremarkable as the outside.

Entreri chuckled at the possibilities, but they could not find any lasting hold within his thoughts. Perhaps he would eventually sneak into the place, just to satisfy his mild curiosity. Perhaps not.

He lingered by the side door, moving close enough past the apparently one-legged beggar, to recognize the cunning tie that bound his second leg up tight against the back of his thigh. The man was a sentry, obviously, and most of the few copper coins that Entreri saw within the opened sack before him had been placed there by the man, salting the purse and heightening the disguise.

No matter, the assassin thought. Playing the part of an ignorant visitor to Calimport, he walked up before the man and reached into his own purse, producing a silver coin and dropping it in the sack. He noted the not-really-old man's eyes flicker open a bit wider when he pulled back his cloak to go to his purse, revealing the hilt of his unique jeweled dagger, a weapon well known in the alleys and shadows of Calimport.

Had he been foolish in showing that weapon? Entreri wondered as he walked away. He hadn't any intention of revealing himself when he came to this place, but also, he had no intention of not revealing himself. The question and the worry, like his musing on the fate of Pook's house, found

no hold in his wandering thoughts. Perhaps he had erred. Perhaps he had shown the dagger in a desperate bid for some excitement. And perhaps the man had recognized it as the mark of Entreri, or possibly he had noticed it only because it was indeed a truly beautiful weapon.

It didn't matter.



LaValle worked very hard to keep his breathing steady and to ignore the murmurs of those nervous associates beside him as he peered deeply into the crystal ball later that same night. The agitated sentry had reported the incident outside, a gift of a strange coin from a man walking with the quiet and confident gait of a warrior and wearing a dagger befitting the captain of a king's guard.

The description of that dagger had sent the more veteran members of the house, the wizard LaValle included, into a frenzy. Now LaValle, a longtime associate of the deadly Artemis Entreri, who had seen that dagger many times and uncomfortably close far too often had used that prior knowledge and his crystal ball to seek out the stranger. His magical eyes combed the streets of Calimport, sifting from shadow to shadow, and then he felt the growing image and knew indeed that the dagger, Entreri's dagger, was back in the city. Now as the image began to take shape, the wizard and those standing beside him, a very nervous Quentin Bodeau and two younger cocky killers, would learn if it was indeed the deadliest of assassins who carried it.

A small bedroom drifted into focus.

"That is Tomnoddy's Inn," explained Dog Perry, who called himself Dog Perry the Heart because of his practice of cutting out a victim's heart fast enough that the dying man could witness its last beats—though none other than Dog Perry himself had ever actually seen that feat performed.

LaValle held up a hand to silence the man as the image became sharper, focusing on the belt looped over the bottom post of the bed, a belt that included the telltale dagger.



“It is Entreri’s,” Quentin Bodeau said with a groan.

A man walked past the belt, stripped to the waist, revealing a body honed by years and years of hard practice, muscles twitching with every movement. Quentin put on a quizzical expression, studying the man, the long hair, the goatee and scratchy, unkempt beard. He had always known Entreri to be meticulous in every detail, a perfectionist to the extreme. He looked to LaValle for an answer.

“It is he,” the wizard, who knew Artemis Entreri perhaps better than anyone else in all the city, answered grimly.

“What does that mean?” Quentin asked. “Has he returned as friend or foe?”

“Indifferent, more likely,” LaValle replied. “Artemis Entreri has always been a free spirit, never showing allegiance too greatly to any particular guild. He wanders through the treasuries of each, hiring to the highest bidder for his exemplary services.” As he spoke, the wizard glanced over at the two younger killers, neither of whom knew Entreri other than by reputation. Chalsee Anguaine, the younger, tittered nervously—and wisely, LaValle knew—but Dog Perry squinted his eyes as he considered the man in the crystal ball. He was jealous, LaValle understood, for Dog Perry wanted, above all else, that which Entreri possessed: the supreme reputation as the deadliest of assassins.

“Perhaps we should find a need for his services quickly,” Quentin Bodeau reasoned, obviously trying hard not to sound nervous, for in the dangerous world of Calimport’s thieving guilds, nervousness equalled weakness. “In that way we might better learn the man’s intentions and purpose in returning to Calimport.”

“Or we could just kill him,” Dog Perry put in, and LaValle bit back a chuckle at the so-predictable viewpoint and also at his knowledge that Dog Perry simply did not understand the truth of Artemis Entreri. No friend or fan of the brash young thug, LaValle almost hoped that Quentin would give Dog Perry his wish and send him right out after Entreri.

But Quentin, though he had never dealt with Entreri personally, remembered well the many, many stories of the assassin’s handiwork,

and the expression the guildmaster directed at Dog Perry was purely incredulous.

“Hire him if you need him,” said LaValle. “Or if not, then merely watch him without threat.”

“He is one man, and we are a guild of a hundred,” Dog Perry protested, but no one was listening to him anymore.

Quentin started to reply, but stopped short, though his expression told LaValle exactly what he was thinking. He feared that Entreri had come back to take the guild, obviously, and not without some rationale. Certainly the deadliest of assassins still had many powerful connections within the city, enough for Entreri, with his own amazing skills, to topple the likes of Quentin Bodeau. But LaValle did not think Quentin’s fears well-founded, for the wizard understood Entreri enough to realize that the man had never craved such a position of responsibility. Entreri was a loner, not a guildmaster. After he had deposed the halfling Regis from his short rein as guildmaster, the place had been Entreri’s for the taking, and yet he had walked away, just walked out of Calimport altogether, leaving all of the others to fight it out.

No, LaValle did not believe that Entreri had come back to take this guild or any other, and he did well to silently convey that to the nervous Quentin. “Whatever our ultimate choices, it seems obvious to me that we should first merely observe our dangerous friend,” the wizard said, for the benefit of the two younger lieutenants, “to learn if he is friend, foe, or indifferent. It makes no sense to go against one as strong as Entreri until we have determined that we must, and that, I do not believe to be the case.”

Quentin nodded, happy to hear the confirmation, and with a bow LaValle took his leave, the others following suit.

“If Entreri is a threat, then Entreri should be eliminated,” Dog Perry said to the wizard, catching up to him in the corridor outside his room. “Master Bodeau would have seen that truth had your advice been different.”

LaValle stared long and hard at the upstart, not appreciating being talked to in that manner from one half his age and with so little experience in such matters, for LaValle had been dealing with dangerous killers such as

Artemis Entreri before Dog Perry was even born. “I’ll not say that I disagree with you,” he said to the man.

“Then why your counsel to Bodeau?”

“If Entreri has come into Calimport at the request of another guild, then any move by Master Bodeau could bring dire consequences to our guild,” the wizard replied, improvising as he went, for he didn’t believe a word of what he was saying. “You know that Artemis Entreri learned his trade under Pasha Basadoni himself, of course.”

“Of course,” Dog Perry lied.

LaValle struck a pensive pose, tapping one finger across his pursed lips. “It may prove to be no problem at all to us,” he explained. “Surely when news of Entreri’s return—an older and slower Entreri, you see, and one, perhaps, with few connections left within the city—spreads across the streets, the dangerous man will himself be marked.”

“He has made many enemies,” Dog Perry reasoned eagerly, seeming quite intrigued by LaValle’s words and tone.

LaValle shook his head. “Most enemies of the Artemis Entreri who left Calimport those years ago are dead,” the wizard explained. “No, not enemies, but rivals. How many young and cunning assassins crave the power that they might find with a single stroke of the blade?”

Dog Perry narrowed his eyes, just beginning to catch on.

“One who kills Entreri, in essence, claims credit for killing all of those whom Entreri killed,” LaValle went on. “With a single stroke of the blade might such a reputation be earned. The killer of Entreri will almost instantly become the highest priced assassin in all the city.” He shrugged and held up his hands, then pushed through his door, leaving an obviously intrigued Dog Perry standing in the hallway with the echoes of his words.

In truth, LaValle hardly cared whether the young troublemaker took those words to heart or not, but he was indeed concerned about the return of the assassin. Entreri unnerved the wizard, more so than all the other dangerous characters that LaValle had worked beside over the many years. LaValle had survived by posing a threat to no one, by serving without judgment whomever it was that had come to power in the guild. He had

served Pasha Pook admirably, and when Pook had been disposed, he had switched his allegiance easily and completely to Regis, convincing even Regis's protective dark elf and dwarven friends that he was no threat. Similarly, when Entreri had gone against Regis, LaValle had stepped back and let the two decide the issue—though, of course, there had never been any doubt whatsoever in LaValle's mind as to which of those two would triumph—then throwing his loyalty to the victor. And so it had gone, down the line, master after master during the tumult immediately following Entreri's departure, to the present incarnation of guildmaster, Quentin Bodeau.

Concerning Entreri, though, there remained one subtle difference. Over the decades, LaValle had built a considerable insulating defense about him. He worked very hard to make no enemies in a world where everyone seemed to be in deadly competition, but he also understood that even a benign bystander could get caught and slaughtered in the common battles. Thus he had built a defense of powerful magic and felt that if one such as Dog Perry decided, for whatever reason, that he would be better off without LaValle around, he would find the wizard more than ready and able to defend himself. Not so with Entreri, LaValle knew, and that is why even the sight of the man so unnerved him. In watching the assassin over the years, LaValle had come to know that where Entreri was concerned, there simply weren't enough defenses.

He sat on his bed until very late that night, trying to remember every detail of every dealing he had ever had with the assassin and trying to figure out what, if anything in particular, had brought Entreri back to Calimport.