

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

R.A. SALVATORE

SERVANT OF THE SHARD

T H E S E L L S W O R D S



PROLOGUE

He glided through the noonday sunshine's oppressive heat, moving as if always cloaked in shadows, though the place had few, and as if even the ever-present dust could not touch him. The open market was crowded—it was always crowded—with yelling merchants and customers bargaining for every copper piece. Thieves were positioning themselves in all the best and busiest places, where they might cut a purse string without ever being noticed, or if they were discovered, where they could melt away into a swirling crowd of bright colors and flowing robes.

Artemis Entreri noted the thieves clearly. He could tell with a glance who was there to shop and who was there to steal, and he didn't avoid the latter group. He purposely set his course to bring him right by every thief he could find, and he'd pushed back one side of his dark cloak, revealing his ample purse—

—revealing, too, the jewel-decorated dagger that kept his purse and his person perfectly safe. The dagger was his trademark weapon, one of the most feared blades on all of Calimport's dangerous streets.

Entreri enjoyed the respect the young thieves offered him, and more than that, he demanded it. He had spent years earning his reputation as the finest assassin in Calimport, but he was getting older. He was losing, perhaps, that fine edge of brilliance. Thus, he

came out brazenly—more so than he ever would have in his younger days—daring them, any of them, to make a try for him.

He crossed the busy avenue, heading for a small outdoor tavern that had many round tables set under a great awning. The place was bustling, but Entreri immediately spotted his contact, the flamboyant Sha'lazzi Ozoule with his trademark bright yellow turban. Entreri moved straight for the table. Sha'lazzi wasn't sitting alone, though it was obvious to Entreri that the three men seated with him were not friends of his, were not known to him at all. The others held a private conversation, chattering and chuckling, while Sha'lazzi leaned back, glancing all around.

Entreri walked up to the table. Sha'lazzi gave a nervous and embarrassed shrug as the assassin looked questioningly at the three uninvited guests.

"You did not tell them that this table was reserved for our luncheon?" Entreri calmly asked.

The three men stopped their conversation and looked up at him curiously.

"I tried to explain . . ." Sha'lazzi started, wiping the sweat from his dark-skinned brow.

Entreri held up his hand to silence the man and fixed his imposing gaze on the three trespassers. "We have business," he said.

"And we have food and drink," one of them replied.

Entreri didn't reply, other than to stare hard at the man, to let his gaze lock with the other's.

The other two made a couple of remarks, but Entreri ignored them completely and just kept staring hard at the first challenger. On and on it went, and Entreri kept his focus, even tightened it, his gaze boring into the man, showing him the strength of will he now faced, the perfect determination and control.

"What is this about?" one of the others demanded, standing up right beside Entreri.

Sha'lazzi muttered the quick beginning of a common prayer.

SERVANT OF THE SHARD

“I asked you,” the man pushed, and he reached out to shove Entreri’s shoulder.

Up snapped the assassin’s hand, catching the approaching hand by the thumb and spinning it over, then driving it down, locking the man in a painful hold.

All the while Entreri didn’t blink, didn’t glance away at all, just kept visually holding the first one, who was sitting directly across from him, in that awful glare.

The man standing at Entreri’s side gave a little grunt as the assassin applied pressure, then brought his free hand to his belt, to the curved dagger he had secured there.

Sha’lazzi muttered another line of the prayer.

The man across the table, held fast by Entreri’s deadly stare, motioned for his friend to hold calm and to keep his hand away from the blade.

Entreri nodded to him, then motioned for him to take his friends and be gone. He released the man at his side, who clutched at his sore thumb, eyeing Entreri threateningly. He didn’t come at Entreri again, nor did either of his friends make any move, except to pick up their plates and sidle away. They hadn’t recognized Entreri, yet he had shown them the truth of who he was without ever drawing his blade.

“I meant to do the same thing,” Sha’lazzi remarked with a chuckle as the three departed and Entreri settled into the seat opposite him.

Entreri just stared at him, noting how out-of-sorts this one always appeared. Sha’lazzi had a huge head and a big round face, and that put on a body so skinny as to appear emaciated. Furthermore, that big round face was always, always smiling, with huge, square white teeth glimmering in contrast to his dark skin and black eyes.

Sha’lazzi cleared his throat again. “Surprised I am that you came out for this meeting,” he said. “You have made many enemies in your rise with the Basadoni Guild. Do you not fear treachery, O powerful one?” he finished sarcastically and again with a chuckle.

Entreri only continued to stare. Indeed he had feared treachery, but he needed to speak with Sha'lazzi. Kimmuriel Oblodra, the drow psionicist working for Jarlaxle, had scoured Sha'lazzi's thoughts completely and had come to the conclusion that there was no conspiracy afoot.

Of course, considering the source of the information—a dark elf who held no love for Entreri—the assassin hadn't been completely comforted by the report.

"It can be a prison to the powerful, you understand," Sha'lazzi rambled on. "A prison to *be* powerful, you see? So many pashas dare not leave their homes without an entourage of a hundred guards."

"I am not a pasha."

"No, indeed, but Basadoni belongs to you and to Sharlotta," Sha'lazzi returned, referring to Sharlotta Vespers. The woman had used her wiles to become Pasha Basadoni's second and had survived the drow takeover to serve as figurehead of the guild. And the guild had suddenly become more powerful than anyone could imagine. "Everyone knows this." Sha'lazzi gave another of his annoying chuckles. "I always understood that you were good, my friend, but never this good!"

Entreri smiled back, but in truth his amusement came from a fantasy of sticking his dagger into Sha'lazzi's skinny throat, for no better reason than the fact that he simply couldn't stand this parasite.

Entreri had to admit that he needed Sha'lazzi, though—and that was exactly how the notorious informant managed to stay alive. Sha'lazzi had made a living, indeed an art, out of telling anybody anything he wanted to know—for a price—and so good was he at his craft, so connected to every pulse beat of Calimport's ruling families and street thugs alike, that he had made himself too valuable to the often-warring guilds to be murdered.

"So tell me of the power behind the throne of Basadoni," Sha'lazzi remarked, grinning widely. "For surely there is more, yes?"

Entreri worked hard to keep himself stone-faced, knowing that a

SERVANT OF THE SHARD

responding grin would give too much away—and how he wanted to grin at Sha'lazzi's honest ignorance of the truth of the new Basadonis. Sha'lazzi would never know that a dark elf army had set up shop in Calimport, using the Basadoni Guild as its front.

"I thought we had agreed to discuss Dallabad Oasis?" Entreri asked in reply.

Sha'lazzi sighed and shrugged. "Many interesting things to speak of," he said. "Dallabad is not one of them, I fear."

"In your opinion."

"Nothing has changed there in twenty years," Sha'lazzi replied. "There is nothing there that I know that you do not, and have not, for nearly as many years."

"Kohrin Soulez still retains Charon's Claw?" Entreri asked.

Sha'lazzi nodded. "Of course," he said with a chuckle. "Still and forever. It has served him for four decades, and when Soulez is dead, one of his thirty sons will take it, no doubt, unless the indelicate Ahdania Soulez gets to it first. An ambitious one is the daughter of Kohrin Soulez! If you came to ask me if he will part with it, then you already know the answer. We should indeed speak of more interesting things, such as the Basadoni Guild."

Entreri's hard stare returned in a heartbeat.

"Why would old Soulez sell it now?" Sha'lazzi asked with a dramatic wave of his skinny arms—arms that looked so incongruous when lifted beside that huge head. "What is this, my friend, the third time you have tried to purchase that fine sword? Yes, yes! First, when you were a pup with a few hundred gold pieces—a gift of Basadoni, eh?—in your ragged pouch."

Entreri winced at that despite himself, despite his knowledge that Sha'lazzi, for all of his other faults, was the best in Calimport at reading gestures and expressions and deriving the truth behind them. Still, the memory, combined with more recent events, evoked the response from his heart. Pasha Basadoni had indeed given him the extra coin that long-ago day, an offering to his most promising

lieutenant for no good reason but simply as a gift. When he thought about it, Entreri realized that Basadoni was perhaps the only man who had ever given him a gift without expecting something in return.

And Entreri had killed Basadoni, only a few months ago.

“Yes, yes,” Sha’lazzi said, more to himself than to Entreri, “then you asked about the sword again soon after Pasha Pook’s demise. Ah, but he fell hard, that one!”

Entreri just stared at the man. Sha’lazzi, apparently just then beginning to catch on that he might be pushing the dangerous assassin too far, cleared his throat, embarrassed.

“Then I told you that it was impossible,” Sha’lazzi remarked. “Of course it is impossible.”

“I have more coin now,” Entreri said quietly.

“There is not enough coin in all of the world!” Sha’lazzi wailed.

Entreri didn’t blink. “Do you know how much coin is in all the world, Sha’lazzi?” he asked calmly—too calmly. “Do you know how much coin is in the coffers of House Basadoni?”

“House Entreri, you mean,” the man corrected.

Entreri didn’t deny it, and Sha’lazzi’s eyes widened. There it was, as clearly spelled out as the informant could ever have expected to hear it. Rumors had said that old Basadoni was dead, and that Charlotte Vespers and the other acting guildmasters were no more than puppets for the one who clearly pulled the strings: Artemis Entreri.

“Charon’s Claw,” Sha’lazzi mused, a smile widening upon his face. “So, the power behind the throne is Entreri, and the power behind Entreri is . . . well, a mage, I would guess, since you so badly want that particular sword. A mage, yes, and one who is getting a bit dangerous, eh?”

“Keep guessing,” said Entreri.

“And perhaps I will get it correct?”

“If you do, I will have to kill you,” the assassin said, still in that awful, calm tone. “Speak with Sheik Soulez. Find his price.”

SERVANT OF THE SHARD

“He has no price,” Sha’lazzi insisted.

Entreri came forward quicker than any cat after a mouse. One hand slapped down on Sha’lazzi’s shoulder, the other caught hold of that deadly jeweled dagger, and Entreri’s face came within an inch of Sha’lazzi’s.

“That would be most unfortunate,” Entreri said. “For you.”

The assassin pushed the informant back in his seat, then stood up straight and glanced around as if some inner hunger had just awakened within him and he was now seeking some prey with which to sate it. He looked back at Sha’lazzi only briefly, then walked out from under the awning, back into the tumult of the market area.

As he calmed down and considered the meeting, Entreri silently berated himself. His frustration was beginning to wear at the edges of perfection. He could not have been more obvious about the roots of his problem than to so eagerly ask about purchasing Charon’s Claw. Above all else, that weapon and gauntlet combination had been designed to battle wizards.

And psionicists, perhaps?

For those were Entreri’s tormentors, Rai-guy and Kimmuriel—Jarlaxle’s Bregan D’aerthe lieutenants—one a wizard and one a psionicist. Entreri hated them both, and profoundly, but more importantly he knew that they hated him. To make things worse Entreri understood that his only armor against the dangerous pair was Jarlaxle himself. While to his surprise he had cautiously come to trust the mercenary dark elf, he doubted Jarlaxle’s protection would hold forever.

Accidents did happen, after all.

Entreri needed protection, but he had to go about things with his customary patience and intelligence, twisting the trail beyond anyone’s ability to follow, fighting the way he had perfected so many years before on Calimport’s tough streets, using many subtle layers of information and misinformation and blending the two together so completely that neither his friends nor his foes could ever truly

unravel them. When only he knew the truth, then he, and only he, would be in control.

In that sobering light, he took the less than perfect meeting with perceptive Sha'lazzi as a distinct warning, a reminder that he could survive his time with the dark elves only if he kept an absolute level of personal control. Indeed, Sha'lazzi had come close to figuring out his current plight, had gotten half of it, at least, correct. The pie-faced man would obviously offer that information to any who'd pay well enough for it. On Calimport's streets these days many were scrambling to figure out the enigma of the sudden and vicious rise of the Basadoni Guild.

Sha'lazzi had figured out half of it, and so all the usual suspects would be considered: a powerful arch-mage or various wizards' guilds.

Despite his dour mood, Entreri chuckled when he pictured Sha'lazzi's expression should the man ever learn the other half of that secret behind Basadoni's throne, that the dark elves had come to Calimport in force!

Of course, his threat to the man had not been an idle one. Should Sha'lazzi ever make such a connection, Entreri, or any one of a thousand of Jarlaxle's agents, would surely kill him.



Sha'lazzi Ozoule sat at the little round table for a long, long time, replaying Entreri's every word and every gesture. He knew that his assumption concerning a wizard holding the true power behind the Basadoni rise was correct, but that was not really news. Given the expediency of the rise, and the level of devastation that had been enacted upon rival houses, common sense dictated that a wizard, or more likely many wizards, were involved.

What caught Sha'lazzi as a revelation, though, was Entreri's visceral reaction.

SERVANT OF THE SHARD

Artemis Entreri, the master of control, the shadow of death itself, had never before shown him such an inner turmoil—even fear, perhaps?—as that. When before had Artemis Entreri ever touched someone in threat? No, he had always looked at him with that awful gaze, let him know in no uncertain terms that he was walking the path to ultimate doom. If the offender persisted, there was no further threat, no grabbing or beating.

There was only quick death.

The uncharacteristic reaction surely intrigued Sha'lazzi. How he wanted to know what had so rattled Artemis Entreri as to facilitate such behavior—but at the same time, the assassin's demeanor also served as a clear and frightening warning. Sha'lazzi knew well that anything that could so unnerve Artemis Entreri could easily, so easily, destroy Sha'lazzi Ozoule.

It was an interesting situation, and one that scared Sha'lazzi profoundly.