

That Curious Sword

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"It is not so different from Calimport," Artemis Entreri insisted, somewhat stubbornly.

Across the table from him, Jarlaxle merely chuckled.

"And you call my people xenophobic," the dark elf replied. "At least we are not so racist toward others of our own species!"

"You talk the part of the fool."

"I talked my way into the city, did I not?" Jarlaxle replied with that mischievous grin of his.

It was true enough. He and Entreri had come north and east, to the region known as the Bloodstone Lands. There, word had it, adventurers could do a fine business in goblin ears and the like, taken from the wild lands of Vaasa to the north of the kingdom of Damara and this city, Damara's capital, Heliogabalus. Liberally invoking the name of Gareth Dragonsbane, and reminding the city guards that the Paladin King of Damara was a man known for tolerance and understanding, a man known for judging all people by their actions and not their heritage, the dark elf had convinced the city's stern protectors to allow him entry.

They had agreed mostly because Jarlaxle was like no other dark elf they had ever heard of-and none of them had ever seen one. Outrageously dressed with a flamboyant wide-brimmed hat capped by a huge purple feather, a flowing cape-blue on the day he had entered the city, since turned red-an eye patch that daily changed from eye to eye, and with no apparent weapons, the drow seemed more a conversation piece than any threat to the security of the great city. They had let him and Entreri, with his magnificent sword and jeweled dagger, enter the city but had promised to watch over them carefully.

After a couple of hours, the assassin and the drow knew that promise was one the lazy guards didn't intend to keep.

"You're taking far too long!" Entreri yelled across the somewhat crowded tavern, at the hapless waitress who had taken their order for drinks and food.

They knew she was in no hurry to return to them, for she had been trembling visibly at the sight of a drow elf all the time she was trying to concentrate on their words.

The woman blanched and started toward the bar, then turned around, then turned around again, as if she didn't know what to do. At a nearby table, a pair of men looked from her to Entreri, their expressions sour.

The assassin sat calmly, almost hoping that the pair would make a move. He was in an especially foul

mood over the last couple of months, ever since he and Jarlaxle had destroyed the Crystal Shard. The road had been boring and uneventful, even with his flamboyant companion, and Jarlaxle's plan to come to the Bloodstone Lands to make a reputation and some coin by killing goblins and other monsters sounded more to Entreri like a job for his former arch-nemesis Drizzt and his "gallant" friends.

Still, Entreri had to admit that their options were a bit limited, since Calimport was shut off to them and they'd have a hard time truly establishing themselves in the bowery of any other city.

"You've flustered her," Jarlaxle remarked.

Entreri just shrugged.

"You know, my friend, there is a saying among the drow nobles that if someone treats you well but is wicked to the peasants, then he is truly a wicked person. Now, in my society, that is a compliment, but here?"

Entreri sat back and lifted the front of his round, thin-brimmed hat-Jarlaxle called it a "bolero"-high above his eyes, so that the drow could clearly see his stare, could see the skepticism in his dark eyes.

"Do not pretend you don't care," Jarlaxle said against that smirk.

"Now my conscience is a dark elf?" Entreri asked incredulously. "How low must I have sunk."

"Artemis Entreri is a better man than to whip a serving girl," was all Jarlaxle said, pointedly turning away.

With a frustrated growl, Entreri shoved back from the table and started across the room, his small form moving silently and gracefully, almost as if he was floating across the room, heading for the serving girl. He passed the table with the two loud onlookers, and one of them started to stand as if to block the way, but a look from Entreri, so cold and strong, was enough to alter that plan.

"You," Entreri called to the girl.

She stopped, and everything in the place seemed to come to a complete halt, all conversations ending abruptly.

Well, except for the knowing chuckle from a peculiar looking dark elf at the back of the room.

The serving girl slowly turned to watch Entreri's approach. He moved right up to her and fell to one knee. "I beg your pardon, good lady," he apologized. He held out his hand and dropped a few gold coins onto her tray.

The young woman stared at him in disbelief. Entreri came up from his bow to stand before her. "I expect that you've forgotten what we ordered," he said, "which is understandable, given the . . ." He paused and glanced back at Jarlaxle, then finished, "... unusual look of my friend. I will tell you our preferences again, and with my apologies for not seeing your dilemma earlier."

All around him, the patrons went back to their private conversations. The waitress beamed a great smile, obviously relieved.

Entreri started to go on, to ask her forgiveness, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do that.

"My thanks," he said, and he reiterated the order, then turned back and rejoined Jarlaxle.

"Wonderful!" the dark elf said. "I do believe that I will have you in a paladin's order within a year!"

Entreri narrowed his dark eyes to which Jarlaxle only laughed.

"Thought I was gonna have to kick yer arse outta here," came a voice from the side.

The companions turned to see the innkeeper, a burly older man who looked like a good portion of his chest had slipped to his belly. Still, the large man held an imposing aura about him. Before either of them could take his words as a threat or an insult, though, the man widened a crooked, gap-toothed smile at them.

"Was glad ye made me girl, Kitzy, happy." He pulled out a chair, reversed it, then straddled it, placing his huge elbows on the table and leaning forward. "So what's bringing a pair like you to Heliogabalus?"

"I just wanted to see a city that could boast of such a stupid name," Entreri quipped, and the innkeeper howled and slapped his thigh.

"We have heard that there is fame and fortune to be made in this country," Jarlaxle said in all seriousness, "for those strong enough and cunning enough to find it."

"And that'd be yerself?"

"Some might think so," the dark elf replied, and he gave a shrug. "As you can imagine, it is not easy for one of my heritage to gain acceptance. Perhaps this is an opportunity worth investigating."

"A hero drow?"

"You have, perhaps, heard of Drizzt Do'Urden?" Jarlaxle asked.

Once before, he had tried to use that name for himself, to impress some farmers who, it turned out, had never heard of the unusual drow warrior of Icewind Dale.

Entreri watched his friend's performance with budding anger, recognizing the ploy for what it was. Jarlaxle had been frustrated with his inability to impersonate Drizzt, or at least, with the lack of gain he would derive from impersonating someone that no one had ever heard of, but perhaps if this man knew of Drizzt, Jarlaxle could assume the identity anew, and begin this phase of his journey a bit higher on the feeding chain of Heliogabalus.

"Drizzit Dudden?" the man echoed badly, scratching his head. "Nope, can't say that I have. He another drow?"

"Another corpse," Entreri put in, and he shot Jarlaxle a glare, not appreciating that Jarlaxle kept bringing up that one's name.

Artemis Entreri was done with Drizzt. He had beaten the drow in their last encounter-with help from a dark elf psionist-but more importantly than killing Drizzt, Entreri had exorcised the demon within himself, the need to ever deal with that one again.

"It does not matter," Jarlaxle said, apparently catching the cue and bringing the conversation back in

place.

"So ye're here to make a name for yerselves, eh? I expect ye'll be headin' up Vaasa way."

"I expect that you ask too many questions," said Entreri, and Jarlaxle tossed him another scowl.

"You do seem rather inquisitive," the drow added, mostly to downplay Entreri's tone.

"Well that's me business," the innkeeper replied. "Folks!!! be askin' me about the strange pair that came through."

"Strange?" Entreri asked.

"Ye got a drow elf with ye."

"True enough."

"So if ye're tellin' me yer tale, then ye're really saving yerselves some trouble," the innkeeper went on.

"The town herald," Jarlaxle said dryly.

That's me business."

"Well, it is as we have already told you," the dark elf replied. He stood up and offered a polite bow. "I am Jarlaxle, and this is my friend, Artemis Entreri."

As the innkeeper replied with the customary "Well met," Entreri put another frown on and glowered at the dark elf, hardly believing that Jarlaxle had just given out their names. The innkeeper offered his name in reply, which Entreri didn't bother to catch, then began telling them a few tales about men who had gone up to fight in Vaasa, which interested Entreri even less. Then, after a call from the bar area, the man excused himself and walked away.

"What?" Jarlaxle asked against Entreri's frown.

"You are so willing to give out our identities?" "Why would I not be?"

Entreri's expression showed clearly that the reasons should be obvious.

"There is nobody chasing us, my friend. We haven't earned the anger of the authorities-not in this region, at least. Were you not known in Calimport as Artemis Entreri? Do not be ashamed of your name!"

Entreri just shook his head, sat back, and took a sip of his wine. This whole adventure on the road was too out of place for him still.

Some time later, the inn clearing out of the nightly patrons, the innkeeper ambled back over to the pair.

"So, when're ye off to Vaasa?" he asked.

Entreri and Jarlaxle exchanged knowing looks-the way the man had spoken the words showed it to be a leading question.

"Soon, I would expect," Jarlaxle replied, nibbling at the bait. "Our funds are running low."

"Ah, ye're lookin' for work already," said the innkeeper. "Killin' goblins only? Well, goblins and orcs, I mean? Or are ye in the game for more subtle forms?"

"You presume much," said Entreri.

"True enough, but ye're not tellin' me that ye're fighters of the open road, now are ye?"

"Would you like to see?" Entreri offered.

"Oh, I'm not doubtin' ye!" the man said with a broad grin. He held his huge paws up before him, warding the dangerous man away. "But ye look like a pair who might be doing better work for better pay, if ye get me meaning."

"And if we do not?"

The innkeeper looked at Entreri curiously.

"If we do not get your meaning," Jarlaxle explained.

"Ah, well, there're plenty of jobs about Heliogabalus," the innkeeper explained. "For the right crew, I mean. The authorities are all up at the wall in Vaasa, fighting monsters, but that leaves many citizens wronged back here in town with nowhere to turn."

Entreri didn't even try to hide his smirk, and in truth, just hearing the man ramble on made him feel a bit more at home. Heliogabalus, after all, wasn't so different from Calimport, where the laws of the land and the laws of the street were two very different codes. He could hardly believe that he and Jarlaxle had been sought out so quickly, though, with no reputation preceding them, but he didn't think too much about it. Likely, most of the fighters of the region were away in the north, along with most of those who had made their living by keeping order on the street, as well, whatever order that might be.

"And you know of these jobs?" Jarlaxle asked the man.

"Well, that's me business!" said the innkeeper. "In truth, I'm a bit short o' help right now, and I got a friend askin' me to hire out a job."

"And what makes you think that we are capable of such a job?" Jarlaxle asked.

"When ye been doin' this as long as ol' Feepun here, ye get to know the look," he explained. "I watch the way ye walk. I see the way ye lift yer drinks, the way that one's eyes keep movin' side-to-side, watchin' everything about him. Oh, I'm guessin' that the work I have for ye, if ye want it, will be far beneath yer true talents, but it's a place to start." He paused and looked hopefully at the pair.

"Well, pray tell us of this job," Jarlaxle prompted after a lengthy pause. "Nothing against the law of the land, you understand," he added, a typical and expected disclaimer that any self-respecting thief or assassin would be quick to add.

"Oh, no, not that," Feepun said with a laugh. "A bit of justice sorted out, that's all."

Jarlaxle and Entreri exchanged knowing smirks-that was the common disclaimer response, usually

meaning that someone either deserved to die, or to be robbed.

"Got me a friend who's lookin' to get an idol back," the innkeeper explained, leaning in and whispering. "He's paying good, too. Hundred gold pieces for one night's work. Ye up for it?"

"Keep talking," said Jarlaxle.

"Seems he's had a dispute over a little statue. Got stolen by a guy near here. He wants it back."

"How do you know that we are capable of doing this?" Entreri asked.

"Telled ye I knowed how to read me guests. I think ye can. Shouldn't be too hard a job, though this thief, Rorli, is a nasty one."

"Perhaps a hundred is not enough, then," Jarlaxle put in.

The innkeeper shrugged. "Said he'd give a hundred. Seems like a fair price to me. I can ask-"

"First tell us the particulars," Entreri interrupted. "We have much to do and need to buy supplies for the road north."

The innkeeper grinned and leaned in even closer, detailing all he knew of Rorli, including the location of the man's apartment, which was not far away. Then, on the request of Jarlaxle and Entreri, the innkeeper left them alone for a bit.

"It might be fun," Jarlaxle said when he and his friend were alone.

"Might get us killed or get Rorli killed."

The dark elf shrugged, as if that hardly mattered. "A hundred gold is a pittance," he said, "but so begins a reputation that might suit us well, perhaps."

"Give me a hundred gold now, so I might buy the items I'll need for the work," Entreri said.

Grinning widely, Jarlaxle reached into a tiny pouch and pulled forth some coins, then some more and some more-more than the purse could possibly hold, except that it contained an extra-dimensional pocket within- until Entreri had closer to two hundred.

"And we're doing this for a hundred?" the assassin asked skeptically.

"The things you buy will be reusable, yes?"

"Yes."

"An investment, then."

It occurred to Entreri that his companion was enjoying this a bit too much. He knew that usually meant trouble.

Still, he shrugged and motioned for the innkeeper to come back.

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Deftly working his housebreaker harness and the ropes he had set with a grapnel on the building's roof, Entreri scaled the two-story structure, setting himself at the ledge of the second story window that he knew from observation to be Rorli's bedroom. A quick check had him confident that there were no pressure traps on this side of the glass.

In perfect balance and with amazing dexterity, the thief pulled forth his other newly-acquired tools, pressing a suction cup delicately against the center of the glass, then attached a swivel arm, with its diamond-tipped glass cutter. He traced a perfect circle and tugged lightly, though the cut piece didn't immediately pull free.

Jarlaxle calmly levitated up beside him. "An interesting contraption for one who cannot levitate," the dark elf said, indicating the harness.

"I make do," Entreri replied.

"But such a waste of money for the darksuit," the drow went on, shaking his head and sighing. "The cloak I gave you is far more effective, and the hat even more than that."

Entreri knew he shouldn't be surprised by anything Jarlaxle said concerning magic items, and he had been fairly convinced that the cloak he wore was some improved version of the concealing drow piwafwi. The remark about the hat, though, had him completely off-guard.

The hat?" he asked. He brought his free hand up to the short and stiff brim of his bolero.

Tip it down and to the left with your left hand and it will shield you from prying eyes."

Entreri did as the drow instructed and an immediate chill washed over him, bringing a shudder.

There," Jarlaxle announced. "When you feel warm again, just tip the hat."

"I feel like a corpse."

"Better to feel like one than to be one."

Entreri tipped his hat in agreement, and shuddered again, then went back to his work on the window, this time popping the cut circle of glass free.

Tight fit," Jarlaxle said dryly.

The assassin tossed him a smirk and gingerly reached through the glass, moving his hand slowly and gently, so gently, about the pane in search of a trap.

"Seems like a lot of work," said Jarlaxle.

He reached up to his huge hat and pulled forth a small black piece of cloth. Seeing it, Entreri just

lowered his head and sighed, for he knew what was coming.

Jarlaxle spun the cloth about and it elongated, grew larger and larger. The drow threw it against the wall, and the whole area of the structure that the black circle covered simply disappeared. The typical portable hole, a rare and valuable item, created an extra-dimensional pocket, but as with most of his items, Jarlaxle's device was far from typical. Depending upon which side the drow threw down, the portable hole would either create the pocket, or simply put a temporary hole in whatever surface it had struck. Jarlaxle casually stepped into the room and pulled his hole in behind him, securing the wall once more.

So flustered was Entreri that he almost moved too quickly across the trapped part of the window pane, feeling the slight lump that indicated a pressure trap.

Regaining his wits, the man's hand worked with perfect movements, and in seconds, he had the trap disarmed and even opened, revealing a small needle, no doubt poisoned.

He had it free and safely stuck through his cuff in a few more seconds, then finished his check of the window, clicked the lock, and entered the room.

"At least I put the wall back," Jarlaxle quipped, indicating the circle of glass in Entreri's hand.

A flick of the assassin's wrist sent the glass piece crashing to the floor.

"So much for secrecy," said Jarlaxle.

"Maybe I'm in the mood to kill someone," Entreri replied, staring hard at the frustrating dark elf.

Jarlaxle shrugged.

Entreri scanned the room. A door was set in the wall across from the window, in the corner to the left, with an open closet beside it. Halfway down the wall to the right of the window stood a chest of drawers as high as Entreri's shoulder. A bed and night table across from the bureau completed the furnishings. Entreri went for the chest of drawers as Jarlaxle moved to the closet.

"Poor taste," he heard the dark elf say, and turned to see Jarlaxle rifling through the hanging clothes, most of them drab and gray.

Entreri shook his head and pulled open the bottom drawer, finding some linens, and under them, a small pouch of coins, which disappeared into his pocket. The next drawer was much the same, and the third one up held assorted toiletry items, including a beautiful bone comb, its handle made of pearl. He took that, too.

The top drawer held the most curious items: a couple of jars of salves and a trio of potion bottles, each filled with a different colored liquid. Entreri nodded knowingly, and looked back to the window, then he shut the drawer and moved along to check the bed.

"Ah, a secret compartment," Jarlaxle said from the closet.

"Let me inspect it for traps."

"No need," said the dark elf.

He stepped back and produced a silver whistle, hung about his neck on a chain. Two short blows and there came a pop and a flash as the secret compartment magically opened.

"You have an answer for everything," Entreri remarked.

"Keeps me alive. Ah, yes, and look what we have here."

A moment later, Jarlaxle walked out of the closet carrying a small statuette, a curious figurine of a muscular man, half white, half black.

"Back to the inn and our reward?" Jarlaxle asked.

In response, the statue began laughing at him. "Doubtful you will be going anywhere, Artemis Entreri!" it said, and the fact that it was addressing Entreri and not Jarlaxle tipped both off that the speech had been preprogrammed, and with foreknowledge of the assassin.

"Um ..." Entreri remarked.

The door to the room opened then, and Jarlaxle fell back toward the window. Entreri stayed to his left, over by the bed. In stepped a muscular, dark-skinned man dressed in long and ragged-edged black robes, a many-crested helm on his head. Behind him loomed a horde of huge gray and black dogs, blending in and out of the shadows in the hallway as if they were made of the same indistinct stuff as those patches of blackness.

Entreri felt a pull from his belt, from Charon's Claw, his magnificent sword. It didn't feel to him as if the sword was relating its eagerness for battle, though, as it usually did, but rather, almost as if it was greeting an old friend.

"I take it you were expecting us," Jarlaxle calmly stated, and he presented the statue as his proof.

"If you give it over without a struggle, you may find us to be important allies," the large man said.

"Well, I am not endeared to it just yet," Jarlaxle replied with a grin. "We could discuss price-"

"Not that worthless idol!"

"The sword," Entreri reasoned.

"And the gauntlet," the man confirmed.

Entreri scoffed at him. "They are better allies to me than you could ever be."

"Ah, yes, but are they as terrible foes as we?"

"Us? We?" Jarlaxle cut in. "Who are you? And I mean that in the plural sense, not the singular."

Both the dark man and Entreri looked at the drow curiously.

"The sword your friend carries does not belong to him," the dark man said to Jarlaxle.

The drow looked to Entreri and asked, "Did you kill the former owner?"

"What do you think?"

Jarlaxle nodded and looked back to the dark man. "It is his."

"It is Netherese!"

Entreri didn't quite know what that meant, but when he looked to Jarlaxle and saw the drow's eyes opened very wide, as wide as they had been when the pair had encountered the dragon to destroy the Crystal Shard, he knew that there might be a bit of trouble.

"Netherese?" the drow echoed. "A people long gone."

"A people soon to be returned," the dark man assured him. "A people seeking their former glory, and their former possessions."

"Well, there is the best news the world has heard in a millennium," Jarlaxle said sarcastically, to which the dark man only laughed.

"I have been sent to retrieve the sword," he explained. "I could have killed you outright and without question, but it occurred to me that two companions such as yourselves might prove to be very valuable allies to Sh-my people, as we shall be to you."

"How valuable?" asked Jarlaxle, obviously intrigued.

"And if I ally with you, then I get to keep the sword?" Entreri asked.

"No," the dark man answered Entreri.

"Then no," Entreri answered back.

"Let us not be hasty," said the deal-maker drow.

"Seems pretty simple to me," said Entreri.

"Then to me, as well," said the dark man. "The hard way, then. As you wish!"

As he finished, he stepped aside, and the pack of great dogs charged into the room, howling madly, their white teeth gleaming in stark contrast against the blackness of them.

Entreri fell into a crouch, ready to spring aside, but Jarlaxle took matters under control, tossing out before the dogs the same portable hole he had used to enter the room.

With howls turning to yelps, the beasts disappeared through the floor, tumbling to the room below. Jarlaxle bent immediately and scooped up the hole, sealing the floor above them.

"I have to get one of those," Entreri remarked.

"If you do, don't jump into mine with it," said Jarlaxle.

Entreri fixed him with a puzzled expression.

"Rift . . . astral . . . you don't want to know," Jarlaxle assured him.

"Right. Now, where does that leave us?" the assassin

"It leaves you with an enemy you do not understand!" the dark man replied.

He laughed and moved to the side, disappearing so quickly, so completely into the shadows that it seemed a trick of the eyes to Entreri. Still, the assassin did manage to flick his fingers and knew his tiny missile had struck home when he heard a slight chirp from the man.

"You favor the darkness, drow?" the dark man asked, and as he finished, the room went perfectly black.

"I do!" Jarlaxle responded, and he blew on the whistle again: a short burst, a long one, and another short one. Entreri heard the door slam.

It was all happening quickly, and purely on instinct, the assassin drew out his sword and his jeweled dagger and moved protectively back against the bed. He tipped his cap again, though he understood this to be magical darkness, impenetrable even by those who had the ability to see in the dark. It was fortunate he did, though, for right after the chill enshrouded his body, he felt the sudden intense heat of a fireball filling the room.

He was down and under the bed in an instant, then came out the other side as the burning mattress collapsed. "Caster!" he yelled.

"Seriously?" came Jarlaxle's sarcastic reply. "Seriously," came the dark man's cry. "And I fear not your little stings!"

"Really?" Entreri asked him, and he was moving as he spoke, trying hard not to give the dark man any definitive target. "Even from the needle off your own window tr-?"

His last word was cut short, though, as complete silence engulfed the room. Profound, magical silence that quieted even the yelping and howling dogs below. Entreri knew that it was Jarlaxle's doing, the drow's standard opening salvo against dangerous magic-users. Without the ability to use verbal components, a wizard's repertoire was severely limited.

But now Entreri had to worry about himself, for his magical sword began a sudden assault upon his sensibilities, compelling him to turn the blade back on himself and take his own life. He had already fought this struggle of wills with the stubborn weapon, but with an apparent representative of its creators nearby, the sword seemed even angrier.

The assassin wore the gauntlet, which minimized the effect the sword could have on him, and he was able to hold the upper hand-somewhat. For he also had to keep exact track of where he was in the room. He had one good shot because of his previous actions and words, he knew, and to miss the opportunity would make this situation even more dangerous.

He aligned himself with the heat emanating from the bed, turned in the direction he guessed to be perfectly perpendicular to the window, then took three definitive strides across the room, finally sheathing the stubborn sword as he went.

He struck once, he struck fast, and he struck true, right into the back of the dark man, his vampiric,

life-stealing jeweled dagger diving in deep.

A strange feeling engulfed Entreri as the dagger pumped forth the life-force of the dying man, dizzying and disorienting. He fell back, then stumbled silently to the floor, and lay there for a long while.

Soon after, he heard the dogs barking again from below.

"It's over," he announced, fearing that Jarlaxle would drop another silence on the room.

A moment later, the darkness lifted as well. Lying on the floor, Entreri looked straight up to see his dark elf companion similarly lying on the ceiling, hands tucked comfortably behind his head. Entreri also noticed that the scarring on the walls and ceiling ended in a bubble about the drow, as if he had enacted some shield that magic, or the fireball at least, could not affect.

The assassin wasn't surprised.

"Well done," Jarlaxle congratulated, floating down gently to the floor, as Entreri stood and brushed himself off. "Without sight or hearing, how did you know he was there?"

Entreri looked over at the dead man. He had pulled out the top drawer of the dresser as he'd slumped to the floor, its contents spilled about him.

"I told him I had hit him with the needle from the window," the assassin explained. "I guessed that one of those bottles contained the antidote. He wanted to use the cover of the darkness and the silence to take care of that little detail."

"Well done!" said Jarlaxle. "I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

Entreri shook his head. "He wasn't lying about the sword," he said. "It held an affinity to him. I felt it clearly, for it even tried to turn against me."

"A Netherese blade..." Jarlaxle mused. He looked at Entreri, and his eyes widened for just a moment, then a smile spread across his face. "Tell me, how does your sword feel about you now?"

Entreri shrugged and gingerly drew the blade. He felt a definite closeness to it, more so than ever before. He turned his puzzled expression upon Jarlaxle.

"Perhaps it thinks of you as more akin to its original makers now," the drow explained. When Entreri gave him an even more confused look, he added, looking at the fallen enemy, "He was no ordinary man."

"So I guessed."

"He was a shade—a creature infused with the stuff of shadow."

Entreri shrugged, for that meant nothing to him.

"And you killed him with your vampiric dagger, yes?"

Entreri shrugged again, starting to get worried, but Jarlaxle merely laughed and produced a small mirror. Looking into it, Entreri could see, even in the dim light, that his normally brown skin had taken on a bit of a gray pallor—nothing too noticeable.

"You have infused yourself with a bit of that essence," said the drow.

"What does that mean?" the alarmed assassin asked.

"It means you've just become even better at your craft, my friend," Jarlaxle said with a laugh. "We will learn in time just how much."

Entreri had to be satisfied with that, he supposed, because there seemed nothing further coming from his oft-cryptic friend. He bent over and picked up the discarded idol. This time it remained silent.

"We should go and collect our money from the innkeeper," he said.

"And?" the drow asked.

"And kill the dolt for setting us up."

"That might not go over well with the Heliogabalus authorities," Jarlaxle reasoned.

Entreri's answer was one so typical that Jarlaxle silently mouthed the words along with him.

"Then we won't tell anybody."