

The Third Level

by R. A. Salvatore, 1959–

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The young man's dark eyes shifted from side to side, always moving, always alert. He caught a movement to the left, between two ramshackle wood-and-clay huts.

Just a child at play, wisely taking to the shadows.

Back to the right, he noticed a woman deep in the recesses beyond a window that was just a hole in the wall, for no one in this section of Calimport was wealthy enough to afford glass. The woman stayed back, standing perfectly still, watching him and unaware that he, in turn, watched her.

He felt like a hunting cat crossing the plain, she just another of the many deer, hoping he would take no notice.

Young Artemis Entreri liked that feeling, that power. He had worked this street—if that's what it could be called, for it was little more than a haphazard cluster of unremarkable shacks dropped across a field of cart-torn mud—for more than five years, since he was but a boy of nine.

He stopped and slowly turned toward the window, and the woman shrank away at the merest hint of a threat.

Entreri smiled and resumed his surveying. This was his street, he told himself, a place he had staked out three months after his arrival in Calimport. The place had no formal name, but now, because of him, it had an identity. It was the area where Artemis Entreri was boss.

How far he had come in five years, hitching a ride all the way from the city of Memnon. Artemis chuckled at the term "all the way." In truth, Memnon was the closest city to Calimport, but in the barren desert land of Calimshan, even the closest city was a long and difficult ride.

Difficult to be sure, but Entreri had made it, had survived, despite the brutal duties the merchants of that caravan had given him, despite the determined advances of one lecherous old man, a smelly unshaven lout who seemed to think that a nine-year-old boy—

Artemis shook that memory from his head, refusing to follow its inevitable course. He had survived the caravan trek and had stolen away from the merchants on the second day in Calimport, soon after he had learned that they had taken him along ultimately to sell him into slavery.

There was no need to remember anything before that, the teenager told himself, neither the journey from Memnon, nor the horrors before the journey that had sent him running from home. Still, he could smell the breath of that lecherous old man, like the breath of his own father, and his uncle.

The pain pushed him back to his angry edge, made him steel his dark eyes and tighten the honed muscles along his arms. He had made it. That was all that counted. This was his street, a place of safety, where no one threatened him.

Artemis resumed his surveillance of his domain, his eyes scanning left to right, then back across the way. He saw every movement and every shadow—always the hunting cat, looking more for prey than for danger.

He couldn't help but chuckle self-deprecatingly at the grandeur of his "kingdom." His street? Only because no other thief would bother to claim it. Artemis could work six days rolling every one of the many drunks who fell down in the mud in this impoverished section and barely scrape enough coins together to eat a decent meal on the seventh.

Still, that was enough for the waif who had fled his home; it had sustained him and given him back his pride over the past five years. Now he was a young man, fourteen years old... or almost fourteen. Artemis didn't remember his exact birthdate, just that there had been a brief period right before the even briefer season of rain, when times in his house were not so terrible.

Again, the young man shook the unwanted memories from his head. He was fourteen, he decided; as if in confirmation, he looked down at his finely toned, lithe frame, barely a hundred and thirty pounds, but with tightened muscles covering every inch. He was fourteen, and he was rightly proud, because he had survived and he had thrived. He surveyed his street, his domain, and his smallish chest expanded. Even the old drunks were afraid of him, showed him proper respect when they addressed him.

He had earned it, and everybody in this little shanty town within the city of Calimport—a city that was nothing more than a collection of a thousand or more

little shanty towns huddled about the white marble and gold-laced structures of the wealthy merchants—respected him, feared him.

Everybody except one.

The new tough, a young man probably three or four years older than Artemis, had arrived earlier in the tenday. He did not ask permission of Artemis before he began rolling the wretches in the mud, or even walking into homes in broad daylight and terrorizing whoever was inside. The stranger forced Artemis's subjects into making him a meal, or into offering him whatever other niceties could be found.

That was the part that angered Artemis more than anything. Artemis held no love, no respect, for the common folk of his carved-out kingdom, but he had seen the newcomer's type before—in both his horrid past and in his troubled nightmares. In truth, there was room on Artemis's street for two thugs. In the five days that the new tough had been about, he and Artemis hadn't even seen each other. And certainly none of Artemis's wretched informants had asked for Protection against this new terror. None of them would dare even to speak with Artemis unless he asked them a direct question.

But there remained the not-inconsiderable matter of pride.

Artemis peered around the shack's corner, down the muddy lane. "Right on schedule," he whispered as the newcomer strolled onto the other end of this relatively straight section of road. "Predictable." Artemis curled his lip up, thinking that predictability was indeed a weakness. He would have to remember that.

The new thug's eyes were dark, his hair, like Entreri's, black as the waters of the Kandad Oasis, so black that every other color seemed to be mixed together in its depths. A native-born Calimshite, Artemis decided, probably a man not unlike himself.

What tortured past had put the invader on his street? he mused. There is no room for that kind of empathy, Artemis scolded himself. Compassion gets you killed.

With a deep, steadying breath, Artemis steeled his gaze once more and watched coldly as the invader threw a staggering old man to the ground and tore open the wretch's threadbare purse. Apparently unsatisfied with the meager take, the young man yanked a half-rotted board from the uneven edge of the nearest shack and whacked his pitiful victim across the forehead. The old man whined and pleaded, but the tough struck him again, flattening his nose. He was on his knees, face covered in bright blood, begging and crying, but got hit again and again until his sobs were muffled by the mud that half-buried his broken face.

Artemis found that he cared nothing for the old wretch. He did care, though, that the man had begged this newcomer, had pleaded with a master who had come uninvited to Artemis Entreri's place.

Entreri's hands went down to his pockets, slipped inside, feeling the only weapons he bothered to carry, two small handfuls of sand and a flat, edged rock. He gave a sigh that reflected both resignation and the tingling excitement of impending battle. He started out from the corner, but paused to consider his own feelings. He was the hunting cat, the master here, so he was rightfully defending his carved-out domain. But there remained a sadness Artemis could not deny, a resignation he could not understand.

Somewhere deep inside him, in a pocket sealed away by the horrors he had known, Artemis knew things should not be like this. Yet the realization did not turn him away from the battle-to-come. Instead, it made him even angrier.

A feral growl escaped Artemis's lips as he stepped around the shack, out into the open and right in the path of the approaching thug.

The older boy stopped, likewise regarding his adversary. He knew of Artemis, of course, the same way Artemis knew of him.

"At last you show yourself openly," the newcomer said confidently. He was bigger than slender Artemis, though there was very little extra weight on his warrior's frame. His shoulders had been broadened by maturity, by an extra few years of a hard life. His muscles, though not so thick, twitched like strong cords.

"I have been looking for you," he said, inching closer. His caution tipped observant Artemis that he was more nervous than his bravado revealed.

"I've never lived in the shadows," Artemis replied. "You could have found me any day, any time."

"Why would I bother?"

Artemis considered the ridiculous question, then gave a little shrug, deciding not to justify the boastful retort with an answer.

"You know why I'm here," the man said at length, his tone sharper than before—a further indication that his nerves were on edge.

"Funny, I thought I was the one who'd found *you*," Artemis replied. He hid well his concern that this thug might be here, might be on Artemis's street, with more of a purpose than he'd presumed.

"You had no choice but to find me," the invader asserted firmly.

There it was again, that implication of a deeper purpose. It occurred to Artemis then that this man, for he was indeed a man and no street waif, should already be above staking out a claim to such a squalid area as this. Even if he were new to the trade, this course would not be the course for an adult ruffian. He should be allied with one of the many thieves' guilds in this city of thieves. Why, then, had he come? And why alone?

Had he been kicked out of a guild, perhaps?

For a brief moment, Artemis feared he might be in over his head. His opponent was an adult, and possibly a veteran rogue. Entreri shook the notion away, saw that his reasoning was not sound. Young upstarts did not get "kicked out" of Calimport's thieves' guilds; they merely disappeared—and no one bothered to question their abrupt absence. But this opponent was not, obviously, some child who had been forced out on his own.

"Who are you?" Artemis asked bluntly. He wished he could take the question back as soon as the words had left his mouth, fearing he had just tipped the thug off to his own ignorance. Artemis was ultimately alone in his place. He had no network surrounding him, no spies of any merit and little understanding of the true power structures of Calimport.

The thug smiled and spent a long moment studying his opponent. Artemis was small, and probably as quick and sure in a fight as the guild's reports had indicated. He stood easily, his hands still in the pockets of his ragged breeches, his bare, brown-tanned arms small, but sculpted with finely honed muscles. The thug knew Artemis had no allies, had been told that before he had been sent out

here. Yet this boy—and in the older thief's eyes, Artemis was indeed a boy—stood easily and seemed composed far beyond his years. One other thing bothered the man.

"You have no weapon?" he asked suspiciously.

Again, Artemis only offered a little shrug in reply.

"Very well, then," the thug said, his tone firm, as if he had just made a decision. To accentuate that very point, he took up the board, still dripping with the blood of the old man. Decisively he brought it up to his shoulder, brought it up, Artemis realized, to a more accessible position. The thug was barely twenty feet away when he began his approach.

So much more was going on here, Artemis knew, and he wanted answers.

Ten feet away.

Artemis held his steady and calm pose, but his muscles tightened in preparation.

The man was barely five feet from him. Entreri's right hand whipped out of his pocket, hurling a spray of fine sand.

Up came the club, and the man turned his head away. He was laughing when he looked back. "Trying to blind me with a handful of sand?" he asked incredulously, sarcastically. "How clever of a desert fighter to think of using sand!"

Of course it was the proverbial "oldest trick" in sneaky Calimshan's thick book of underhanded street fighting techniques. And the next oldest trick followed when Artemis thrust his hand back into his pocket, and whipped a second handful of sand.

The thug was laughing even as he closed his eyes, defeating the attack. He blinked quickly, just for an instant, a split second. But that instant was long enough for ambidextrous Artemis to withdraw his left hand from his pocket and fling the edged stone. He had just one window of opportunity, an instant of time, a square inch of target. He had to be perfect—but that was the way it had been for Artemis since he was a child, since he went out into the desert, a land that did not forgive the smallest of mistakes.

The sharp stone whistled past the upraised club and hit the thug in the throat, just to one side of center. It nicked into his windpipe and deflected to the left, cutting the wall of an artery before rebounding free into the air.

"Wh—?" the thug began, and he stopped, apparently surprised by the curious whistle that had suddenly come into his voice. A shower of blood erupted from his neck, spraying up across his cheek. He slapped his free hand to it, fingers grasping, trying to stem the flow. He kept his cool enough to hold his makeshift club at the ready the whole time, keeping Artemis at bay, though the younger man had put his hands back in his pockets and made no move.

He was good, Artemis decided, honestly applauding the man's calm and continued defense. He was good, but Artemis was perfect. You had to be perfect.

The outward flow of blood was nearly stemmed, but the artery was severed and the windpipe open beside it.

The thug growled and advanced. Artemis didn't blink.

The thug stopped suddenly, dark eyes wide. He tried to speak out, but only sputtered forth a bright gout of blood. He tried to draw breath, but gurgled again pitifully, his lungs fast-filling with blood, and sank to his knees.

It took him a long time to die. Calimport was an unforgiving place. You had to be perfect.

"Well done," came a voice from the left.

Artemis turned to see two men casually stroll out of a narrow alley. He knew at once that they were thieves, probably guildsmen, for confident Artemis believed only the most practiced rogues could get so close to him without him knowing it.

Artemis looked back to the corpse at his feet, and a hundred questions danced about his thoughts. He knew then with cold certainty that this had been no random meeting. The thug he had killed had been sent to him.

Artemis chuckled, more a derisive snort than a laugh, and kicked a bit of dirt into the dead man's face.

Less than perfect got you killed. Perfect, as Artemis soon found out, got you invited into the local thieves' guild.

Artemis could hardly fathom the notion that all the food he wanted was available to him with a snap of his fingers. He had been offered a soft bed, too, but feared that such luxury would weaken him. He slept on his floor at night.

Still, the offer was the important thing. Artemis cared little for material wealth or pleasures, but he cared greatly that those pleasures were being offered to him.

That was the benefit of being in the Basadoni Cabal, one of the most powerful thieves' guilds in all the city. In fact there were many benefits. To an independent young man such as Artemis Entreri, there were many drawbacks, as well—Lieutenant Theebles Royuset, the man that Pasha Basadoni had appointed as Entreri's personal mentor, was one of these. He was the epitome of men that young Artemis Entreri loathed, gluttonous and lazy, with heavy eyelids that perpetually drooped. His smelly brown hair was naturally frizzy, but too greased and dirty to come away from his scalp, and he always wore the remnants of his last four meals on the front of his shirt. Physically, there was nothing quick about Theebles, except the one movement that brought the latest handful of food into his slopping jowls, but intellectually, the man was sharp and dangerous.

And sadistic. Despite the obvious physical limitations, Theebles was in the second rank of command in the guild, along with a half-dozen other lieutenants, behind only Pasha Basadoni himself.

Artemis hated him. Theebles had been a merchant, and like so many of Calimport's purveyors, had gotten himself into severe trouble with the city guard. So Theebles had used his wealth to buy himself an appointment to the guild, that he might go underground and escape Calimport's dreaded prisons. That wealth must have been considerable, Artemis knew, for Pasha Basadoni to even accept this dangerous slug into the guild, let alone appoint him a lieutenant.

Artemis was savvy enough to understand, then, that Basadoni's choice of sadistic Theebles as his personal mentor would be a true test of his loyalty to his new family.

A brutal test, Artemis realized as he leaned against the squared stone wall of a square chamber in the guild hall's basement. He crossed his arms defensively over his chest, fingers of his thick gloves tapping silently, impatiently. He found that he missed his street in the city outside, missed the days when he had answered to no

one but himself and his survival instincts. Those days had ended with the well-aimed throw of an edged stone.

"Well?" Theebles, who had come for one of his many unannounced inspections, prompted again. He picked something rather large out of his wide and flat nose. Like everything else that fell into his plump and almost babylike hands, it quickly went into his mouth.

Artemis didn't blink. He looked from Theebles to the ten-gallon glass case across the dimly lit room; the chamber, though fully twenty feet underground, was dry and dusty.

Swaying with every step, the fat lieutenant paced to the case. Artemis obediently followed, but only after a quick nod to the rogue standing guard at the door, the same rogue who had met Artemis on the street after he had killed the thug. That man, Dancer by name, was another of Theebles's servants, and one of the many friends young Artemis had made in his time in the guild. Dancer returned the nod and slipped out into the hall.

He trusts me, Artemis thought. He considered Dancer the fool for it.

Artemis caught up to Theebles right in front of the case. The fat man stared intently at the small orange snakes intertwined within.

"Beautiful," Theebles said. "So sleek and delicate." He turned his heavy-lidded gaze Artemis's way.

Artemis could not deny the words. The snakes were Thesali vipers, the dreaded "Two-Step". If one bit you, you yelled, took two steps, and fell down dead. Efficient Beautiful.

Milking the venom from the deadly vipers, even with the thick gloves he wore, was not an enviable task. But then, wretched Theebles Royuset made it a point to never give Artemis an enviable task.

Theebles stared at the tantalizing snakes for a long while, then glanced back to the right. He stymied his surprise, realizing that silent Artemis had moved around him, toward the far end of the room. He turned to the young rogue and gave a wry snicker, that superior chuckle that reminded Artemis pointedly of his position as an underling.

It was then that Theebles noticed the quarter table, partially concealed by a screen. Surprise showed on his pudgy, blotchy features for a moment before he caught himself and calmed. "Your doing?" he asked, approaching the screen and indicating the small and round glass-topped table, flanked on either side by a waist-high lever.

Artemis turned slowly to glance over one shoulder as Theebles passed him by, but didn't bother to answer. Artemis was the milker of the snakes. Of course the table was "his doing". Who else, except for his taunting mentor, would even bother coming into this room?

"You have made many allies among the lower members of the guild," Theebles remarked, as close to a word of praise as he had ever given to Artemis. In fact, Theebles was truly impressed; it was quite a feat for one so new to the guild to have the infamous quarter table moved to a quiet and convenient location. But Theebles, when he took the moment to consider it, was not so surprised. This young Artemis Entreri was an imposing character, a charismatic young rogue who had ruffians much older than him showing a great degree of respect.

Yes, Theebles knew that Artemis Entreri was not an average little pickpocket. He could be a great thief, among the very best. That could be a positive thing for the Basadoni Cabal. Or it could be a dangerous thing.

Without turning back, Artemis walked across the room and sat down at one of the two chairs placed on opposite sides of the quarter table.

It was not a wholly unexpected challenge, of course. Theebles had played out similar scenarios several times with the youths under his severe tutelage. Furthermore, young Artemis certainly knew now that it had been Theebles who had sent the rogue out to the shantytown to challenge him. Dancer had told Entreri as much, Theebles guessed; he made a mental note to have a little talk with Dancer when he was done with Entreri. Laughing slightly, the fat man sauntered across the room to stand beside the seated young rogue. He saw that the four glasses set in the evenly spaced depressions about the table's perimeter were half-filled with clear water. In the middle of the table sat an empty milking vial.

"You understand that I am a close personal friend of Pasha Basadoni," Theebles said.

"I understand that if you sit down in that chair, you accept the challenge willingly," Artemis replied. He reached in and removed the milking vial. By the strict rules of the challenge, the table had to be clear of everything except the four glasses.

Theebles shook with laughter, and Artemis had expected no less. Artemis knew that he had no right to make such a challenge. Still, Artemis breathed a little easier when Theebles clapped him on the shoulders and walked about the table. The fat lieutenant stopped and peered intently into each of the glasses, as if he had noticed something.

It was a bluff, Artemis pointedly told himself. The venom of a Thesali viper was perfectly clear, like the water.

"You used enough?" Theebles asked with complete calm.

Artemis didn't respond, didn't blink. He knew, as did the fat lieutenant, that a single drop was all that was needed.

"And you only poisoned one glass?" Theebles asked, another rhetorical question, for the rules of this challenge were explicit.

Theebles sat in the appointed chair, apparently accepting the challenge. Artemis's facade nearly cracked, and he had to stifle a sigh of relief. The lieutenant could have refused, could have had Artemis dragged out and disembowelled for even thinking that he was worthy of making such a challenge against a ranking guild member. Artemis had suspected that cruel Theebles would not take so direct a route, of course. Theebles hated him as much as he hated Theebles, and he had done everything in his power over the last few tendays to feed that hatred.

"Only one?" Theebles asked again.

"Would it matter?" Artemis replied, thinking himself clever. "One, two, or three poisoned drinks, the risks remain equal between us."

The fat lieutenant's expression grew sour. "It is a quarter table," he said condescendingly. "A quarter. One in four. That is the rule. When the top is spun, each of us has a one-in-four chance of sipping the poisoned drink. And by the rules, no more than one glass can be poisoned, no more than one can die."

"Only one is poisoned," Artemis confirmed.

"The poison is that of the Thesali viper, and only the poison of a Thesali viper?"

Artemis nodded. To a wary challenger like the young rogue, the question screamed the fact that Theebles didn't fear such venom. Of course he didn't.

Theebles returned the nod and took on a serious expression to match his opponent's. "You are certain of your course?" he asked, his voice full of gravity.

Artemis did not miss the experienced killer's sly undertones. Theebles was pretending to offer him the opportunity to change his mind, but it was only a ruse. And Artemis would play along. He glanced about nervously, summoned a bead of sweat to his forehead. "Perhaps..." he began tentatively, giving the appearance of hedging.

"Yes?" Theebles prompted after a long pause.

Artemis started to rise, as though he had indeed changed his mind about making such a challenge; Theebles stopped him with a sharp word. The expression of surprise upon Artemis's young and too-delicate face appeared sincere.

"Challenge accepted," the lieutenant growled. "You cannot change your mind."

Artemis fell back into his seat, grabbed the edge of the tabletop, and yanked hard. Like a gambling wheel, the top rotated, spinning smoothly and quietly on its central hub. Artemis grabbed the long lever flanking him, one of the table's brakes, and Theebles, smiling smugly, did likewise.

It quickly became a game of nerves. Artemis and Theebles locked gazes, and for the first time, Theebles saw the depth of his young adversary. At that moment Theebles began to appreciate the pure cunning of merciless Artemis Entreri. Still, he was unafraid and remained composed enough to note the subtle shift of Artemis's eye, the hint that the young man was quietly watching the spinning glasses more intently than he was letting on.

Artemis caught a minute flicker, a subtle flash of reflected light from the table, then a second. Long before Theebles had come to visit, he had chipped the rim of one of the glasses ever so slightly. Artemis had then painstakingly aligned the table and the seat he'd chosen. With every rotation, the tiny chip in the glass would flicker a reflection of the torch burning in the nearest wall sconce—but to his eyes only.

Artemis silently counted the elapsed time between flickers, measuring the table's speed.

"Why would you take such a risk?" wary Theebles asked, verbally prodding the young man's concentration. "Have you come to hate me so much in a few short tendays?"

"Long months," Artemis corrected. "But it has been longer than that. My fight in the street was no coincidence. It was a set-up, a test, between myself and the man I had to kill. And you are the one who arranged it."

The way that Artemis described his adversary, "the man I had to kill," tipped Theebles off to the young rogue's motivation. The stranger in the dusty street had likely been Artemis Entreri's first kill. The lieutenant smiled to himself. Some weaklings found murder a difficult thing to accept; either the first kill, or the inevitable path it had set the young man on, was not to Entreri's liking.

"I had to know if you were worthy," Theebles said, admitting his complicity. But Artemis was no longer listening. The young rogue had gone back to his subtle study of the spinning glasses.

Theebles eased his brake, slowing the rotation considerably. The hub was well-greased—some even claimed there was a bit of magic about it—so the top did not need much momentum to keep spinning at a nearly constant rate.

Artemis showed no sign of distress at the unexpected speed change. He kept completely composed and began silently counting once more. The marked glass flickered exactly an eighth of the circumference from Theebles's chair. Artemis adjusted his cadence to make each complete rotation take a count of eight. He saw the flicker; he counted and as he hit nine, abruptly pulled the brake.

The tabletop came to a sudden stop, liquid sloshing back and forth inside the glasses, droplets of it splattering to the table and the floor.

Theebles eyed the glass in front of him. He thought to remark that the young rogue didn't understand the proper protocol of the quarter table challenge, for the brakes were supposed to be applied slowly, alternately between the opponents, and the challenged party would make the final stop. The fat lieutenant decided not to make an issue of it. He knew that he had been taken, but didn't really care. He'd been expecting this challenge for almost a tenday and had enough antivenin in his blood to defeat the poison of a hundred Thesali vipers. He lifted his glass. Artemis did likewise, and together they drank deeply.

Five seconds passed. Ten.

"Well," Theebles began. "It would seem that neither of us found the unfortunate quarter this day." He pulled his huge form from the chair. "Of course, your insolence will be reported in full to Pasha Basadoni."

Artemis showed no expression, didn't blink. Theebles suspected that the young rogue was hiding his surprise, or that he was fuming or trying to figure out how he might escape this unexpected disaster. As the seconds passed, the young man's continued calm began to bother the fat lieutenant.

"You have had your one challenge," Theebles snapped suddenly, loudly. "I am alive, thus you have lost. Expect to pay dearly for your impertinence!"

Artemis didn't blink.

Good enough for the young upstart, the fat lieutenant decided with a snap of his fingers. As he departed, he thought of many ways that he might properly punish Artemis.

How delicious that torture would be, for Basadoni could not stop Theebles this time. The guildmaster, who by Theebles's estimation had become much too soft in his old age, had intervened many times on behalf of Entreri calming Theebles whenever he learned that the fat lieutenant was planning a brutal punishment for the young upstart. Not this time, though. This time, Basadoni could not intervene. This time, Entreri had certainly earned the punishment.

The first place Theebles went when he returned to his lavish private quarters was the well-stocked cupboard. The antivenin to Thesali viper poison was known to cause great hunger after the poison was introduced, and Theebles had never been one to need much prompting toward food. He pulled out a two-layered cake, a gigantic, sugar-speckled arrangement, decorated with the sweetest of fruits.

He took up a knife to cut a slice, then shrugged and decided to eat the whole thing. With both hands, he lifted the cake for his mouth.

"Oh, clever lad!" Theebles congratulated, returning the cake to the table. "Sly upon sly, a feint within a feint! Of course you knew the effects of Thesali antivenin. Of course you knew that I would run back here to my personal cupboard! And you have had the time, haven't you, Artemis Entreri? Clever lad!"

Theebles looked to the window and thought to throw the cake out into the street. Let the homeless waifs find its crumbs and eat them, and all fall down dead! But the cake, the beautiful cake. He couldn't bear to be done with it, and he was so, so famished.

Instead, he moved across the room to his private desk. He carefully unlocked the trapped drawers, checked the wax seal to be certain that no one had been here before him, to be certain that Artemis could not have tampered with this supply. Satisfied that all was as it should be, Theebles opened a secret compartment at the bottom of the drawer and removed a very valuable vial. It contained an amber-colored liquid, a magic potion that would neutralize any poison a man might imbibe. Theebles looked back to the cake. Would Artemis be as clever as he believed? Would the young rogue really understand the concept of sly upon sly?

Theebles sighed and decided Artemis just might be that clever. The vial of universal antidote was very expensive, but the cake looked so very delicious!

"I will make Artemis Entreri pay for another vial," the now-famished lieutenant decided as he swallowed the antidote. Then he romped across the room and took a tiny bit off the edge of the cake, testing its flavor. It was indeed poisoned. Experienced Theebles knew that at once from the barely perceptible sour edge among the sweetness.

The antidote would defeat it, the lieutenant knew, and he would not let the young upstart cheat him out of so fine a meal. He rubbed his plump hands together and took up the cake, gorging himself, swallowing huge chunks at a time, wiping the silver serving platter clean.

Theebles died that night, horribly, waking from a sound sleep into sheer agony. It was as if his insides were on fire. He tried to call out, but his voice was drowned by his own blood.

His attendant found him early the next morning, his mouth full of gore, his pillowcase spotted with brownish red spots, and his abdomen covered with angry blue welts. Many in the guild had heard Dancer speak of the previous day's challenge, and so the connection to young Artemis Entreri was not a hard one to make.

The young assassin was caught on the streets of Calimport a tenday later, after giving Pasha Basadoni's powerful spy network a fine run. He was more resigned than afraid as two burly, older killers led him roughly back to the guild hall.

Artemis believed Basadoni would punish him, perhaps even kill him, for his actions; it was worth it just to know that Theebles Royuset had died horribly.

He had never been in the uppermost chambers of the guild hall before, never imagined what riches lay within. Beautiful women, covered in glittering jewels, roamed through every room. Great cushiony couches and pillows were heaped everywhere, and behind every third archway was a steaming tub of scented water.

This entire floor of the hall was devoted to purely hedonistic pursuits, a place dedicated to every imaginable pleasure. Yet to Artemis, it appeared more dangerous than enticing. His goal was perfection, not pleasure, and this was a place where a man would grow soft.

He was somewhat surprised, then, when he at last came to stand before Pasha Basadoni, the first time Artemis had actually met the man. Basadoni's small office was the only room on this floor of the guild hall not fitted for comfort. Its furnishings were few and simple—a single wooden desk and three unremarkable chairs.

The pasha fit the office. He was a smallish man, old but stately. His gaze, like his posture, was perfectly straight. His gray hair was neatly groomed, his clothes unpretentious.

After only a couple moments of scrutiny, Artemis understood that this was a man to be respected, even feared. Looking at the pasha, Artemis considered again how out of place a slug like Theebles Royuset had been. He guessed at once that Basadoni must have hated Theebles profoundly. That notion alone gave him hope.

"So you admit you cheated at the quarter challenge?" Basadoni asked after a long and deliberate pause, after studying young Artemis at least as intently as Artemis was studying him.

"Isn't that part of the challenge?" Artemis was quick to reply.

Basadoni chuckled and nodded.

"Theebles expected I would cheat," Artemis went on. "A vial of universal antidote was found emptied within his room."

"And you tampered with it?"

"I did not," Artemis answered honestly.

Basadoni's quizzical expression prompted the young rogue to continue.

"The vial worked as expected, and the cake was indeed conventionally poisoned," Artemis admitted.

"But..." Basadoni said.

"But no antidote in Calimshan can defeat the effects of crushed glass."

Basadoni shook his head. "Sly upon sly within sly," he said. "A feint within a feint within a feint." He looked curiously at the clever young lad. "Theebles was capable of thinking to the third level of deception," he reasoned.

"But he did not believe that I was," Artemis quickly countered. "He underestimated his opponent."

"And so he deserved to die," Basadoni decided after a short pause.

"The challenge was willingly accepted," Artemis quickly noted, to remind the old pasha that any punishment would surely, by the rules of the guild, be unjustified.

Basadoni leaned back in his chair, tapping the tips of his fingers together. He stared at Artemis long and hard. The young assassin's reasoning was sound, but he almost ordered Artemis killed anyway, seeing clearly the cruelty, the absolute lack of compassion, within this one's black heart. He understood that he could never truly trust Artemis Entreri, but he realized, too, that young Artemis would not likely strike against him, an old man and a potentially valuable mentor, unless he forced the issue. And Basadoni knew, too, how valuable an asset a clever and cold rogue like Artemis Entreri might be—especially with five other ambitious lieutenants scrambling to position themselves in the hope that he would soon die.

Perhaps I will outlive those five, after all, the pasha thought with a slight smile. To Artemis he merely said, "I will exact no punishment."

Artemis showed no emotion.

"Truly you are a cold-hearted wretch," Basadoni went on with a helpless snicker, his voice honestly sympathetic. "Leave me, Lieutenant Entreri." He waved his age-spotted hand as if the whole affair left a sour taste in his mouth.

Artemis turned to go, but stopped and glanced back, realizing only then the significance of how Basadoni had addressed him.

The two burly escorts at the newest lieutenant's side caught it, too. One of them bristled anxiously, glaring at the Young man. *Lieutenant* Artemis Entreri? The man's dour expression seemed to say in disbelief. The boy, half his size had only been in the guild for a few months. He was only fourteen years old!

"Perhaps my first duty will be to see to your continued training," Artemis said, staring coldly into the muscular man's face. "You must learn to mask your feelings better."

The man's moment of anger was replaced by a feeling of sheer dread as he, too, stared into those callous and calculating dark eyes, eyes too filled with evil for one of Artemis Entreri's tender age.

Later that afternoon, Artemis Entreri walked out of the Basadoni guild hall on a short journey that was long overdue. He went back to his street, the territory he had carved out amidst Calimport's squalor.

A dusty orange sunset marked the end of another hot day as Artemis turned a corner and entered that territory-the same corner the thug had turned just before Artemis had killed him.

Artemis shook his head, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by it all. He had survived these streets, the challenge Theebles Royuset had thrown his way, and the counter-challenge he had offered in response. He had survived, and he had thrived, and was now a full lieutenant in the Basadoni Cabal.

Slowly, Artemis walked the length of the muddy lane, his gaze stalking from left to right and back again, just as he had done when he was the master here. When these had been his streets, life had been simple. Now his course was set out before him, among his own treacherous kind. Ever after would he need to walk with his back close to a wall-a solid wall that he had already checked for deadly traps and secret portals.

It had all happened so fast, in the course of just a few months. Street waif to lieutenant in the Basadoni Cabal, one of the most powerful thieves' guilds in Calimport.

Yet as he looked back over the road that had brought him from Memnon to Calimport, from this muddy alley to the polished marble halls of the thieves' guild, Artemis Entreri began to wonder if, perhaps, the change was somewhat less miraculous. Nothing really happened so quickly; he'd been led to this seemingly remarkable state by years spent honing his street skills, years spent challenging and conquering brutal men like Theebles, or the old lecher in the caravan, or his father...

A noise from the side drew Artemis's attention to a wide alley where a group of boys came rambling past. Half the grimy mob tossed a small stone back and forth while the other half tried to get it away.

It came as a shock to Artemis when he realized that they were his own age, perhaps even a bit older. And the shock carried with it more than a little pain.

The boys soon disappeared behind the next shack, laughing and shouting, a cloud of dust in their wake. Artemis summarily dismissed them, thinking again of what he had accomplished and what heights of glory and power might still lay before him. After all, he had purchased the right to dream such dark dreams at the cost of his youth and innocence, coins whose value he did not recognize until they were spent.

