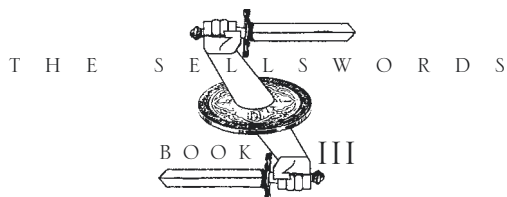




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## ROAD OF THE PATRIARCH



# PRELUDE

Yes, she is beautiful, Artemis Entreri thought as he watched the naked Calihye walk from the bed to the clothing rack to retrieve her breeches and shirt. She moved with the grace of a skilled warrior, one leg flowing effortlessly in front of the other, the soft pads of the balls of her feet coming down lightly and cushioning her step. She was of medium height, lithe but strong, and the few scars on her body did not detract from the graceful image of the tight cords of muscle. She was a creature of paradox, Entreri realized as he watched her, a being of fire and fluidity. She could be ferocious or tender, and she seemed to understand how to move between the two to the greatest effect when they were making love.

And no doubt she did the same on the battlefield. Calihye wasn't just a fighter; she was a warrior, a thinker. She knew her own strengths and weaknesses as well as any, but measured her opponent's better than most. Entreri had no doubt that the woman often used her feminine charms on unwitting opponents, throwing them off guard before eviscerating them.

He respected that; the image brought a smile to his often-scowling face.

It was a short-lived grin, though, as the man considered his own situation. On a peg near the clothes rack where Calihye dressed hung his small-brimmed black hat, the one Jarlaxle had given him. Entreri had found that the cap, like his drow companion, was much more than it seemed. It held many beneficial properties, magical and mechanical, including the ability to chill his body to better help him hide from eyes that sensed heat instead of light, and a wire inset into the band, easily retractable, that allowed the hat to fit so snugly that even a fall from a horse wouldn't dislodge it.

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More than it seemed, Entreri thought. Wasn't everything?

He had slept soundly after his encounter with Calihye the previous night. Too soundly? Calihye could have killed him, he realized, and the thought flickered through his mind that perhaps the woman was using her charms on him. She had put him into more vulnerable a position than he had ever known.

No, he assured himself. Her feelings for me are genuine. This is no game.

Except, he noted, wouldn't that have been Calihye's strategy, to put him so completely off his guard that she could risk an attack upon him?

Entreri dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his bleary eyes. He shook his head as he did, and was glad that his hands covered his helpless chuckle. He would drive himself mad with such thoughts.

"Are you coming with me, then?" Calihye asked, drawing him from his reverie.

He lifted his head and looked at her again as she stood by the rack. She was still nude, though his eyes did not roam her body, but rather settled upon her face. By all measures, Calihye had once been a strikingly beautiful woman, with startling eyes that sometimes showed reflections of gray amidst their blue. At other times, depending on the background—the lighting, her clothing—those eyes glowed an exquisite shade of medium blue, and either way they always seemed striking because of their contrast with her raven-dark hair. Her face was symmetrical, her bone structure impeccable.

But that scar. It ran across her right cheek to her nose, then down through her lips to the middle of her chin. It was an angry scar, often inflamed and red. Calihye hid behind it, Entreri knew, as if in denial of her feminine beauty.

When she flashed her smile, though, so mischievous and dangerous, Entreri hardly noticed the tear in her lips. To Artemis Entreri, she remained beautiful, and other than to consider her motivations for keeping the scar and the deeper meaning it seemed to hold to her, he hardly noticed it. It did not detract in the least for him, so lost was he in the mysteries that simmered in her eyes. She shook her head and her thick hair rolled over her shoulders, and Entreri wanted to leap over and bury his face in that warm, soft mane.

"We agreed to eat," Calihye reminded him. She gave a sigh and began pulling on her shirt. "I would have thought you'd worked up a great and growling hunger."

As her head came up through her collar her eyes set on her lover, and Calihye's smile disappeared.

That flash of a frown clued Entreri in to his own expression. He was scowling. He didn't know why. There wasn't a singular thought in his mind that might bring a scowl to his face just then. Calihye wouldn't elicit such a

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thought from him, after all, for he considered her a bright spot in his miserable life. But he was indeed scowling, as her reflective frown revealed.

He wore that dour expression often of late—or had it been forever?—and usually for no apparent reason at all. Except, of course, that he was often angry—at everything and nothing all at once.

“We do not have to eat,” the woman said.

“No, no, of course we should go and get some food. The morning is late already.”

“What troubles you?”

“Nothing.”

“Did I not please you last night?”

Entreri nearly snorted aloud at that absurdity, and he couldn’t suppress a smile as he considered Calihye and recognized that she was simply goading him for a compliment.

“You have pleased me many nights. Greatly. And last night was among those,” he offered to her, and he was glad to see her apparent relief.

“Then what troubles you?”

“I told you that I am not troubled.” Entreri reached down and gathered up his pants and began pulling them over his feet. He stopped when he felt Calihye’s hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, staring down at him, a look of concern on her face.

“Your words do not match your expression,” she said. “Tell me. Can you not trust me? What is it that so upsets the humors of Artemis Entreri? What is it about you? What happened to you, to ignite this inner fire?”

“You speak in foolish riddles of your own imagination.” He bent down again to pull his pants on, but Calihye gripped him more tightly, forcing him to look back at her.

“What is it?” she pressed. “How is a warrior of such perfection as Artemis Entreri created? What history did this to you?”

Entreri looked away from her, looked down at his own feet. But he didn’t really see them. In his mind’s eye, Artemis Entreri was a boy again, barely more than a child, in the dusty streets of a desert port city that was full of the smell of brine or filled with stinging sand, depending upon which way the wind was blowing.



The wagons creaked even though they were not moving, as the sandy breeze sizzled against their wooden sides. A couple of the horses nickered uncomfortably and one even reared up as far as its heavy, tight harness would

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allow. The driver, a thin and sinewy man of harsh, angular features who reminded the boy of his father, wasted no time in putting the whip savagely to the frightened creature.

Yes, just like his father.

The fat spice dealer seated on one wagon stared at him for a long time. Those heavy-lidded eyes seemed to invite him to slumber, as mesmerizing as a swaying serpent. There was something there, he knew, some magic behind that gaze, some method of control that had allowed the pathetic, slovenly beast to rise to prominence among the troupe gathered for their seasonal caravan out of Memnon. The others all deferred to that one, he could see, though he was just a boy and knew little about the world or about the hierarchy of the merchant class.

But that one was the boss, to be sure, and the boy flushed, flattered that the leader of so many would spend time with him and his mother. That prideful flush became an open-jawed, wide-eyed stare of disbelief as the fat man handed over coins—gold coins! *Gold* coins! The boy had heard of them, had heard of golden coins, but had never seen any. He had seen silver once, handed by some stranger to his father, Belrigger, before the stranger went behind the curtain with his mother.

But never gold. His mother was holding gold!

How thrilling it had been, but briefly. Then Shanali, his mother, grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and pushed him to the fat man's waiting grasp. He wriggled and fought the hold. He tried to tug away from the sweaty arms, at least so that he could get some answers from his mother.

But when he finally managed to face her, she had already turned and started away.

He called out to her. He pleaded with her. He asked her what it all meant.

“Where are you going?”

“Why am I still here?”

“Why is he holding me?”

“Mama-hal!”

And she did glance back, only once and only for a moment. Just long enough for him to see her sunken, sad eyes one last time.



“Artemis?”

He shook his memories away and looked at Calihye. She seemed amused and concerned all at once. Strangely so.

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“Are you to sit there with a flute in your hands and your breeches about your ankles all morning?”

The question shook him, and only then did Entreri realize that he was indeed holding Idalia’s flute, the magical instrument the dragon sisters had given to him. And yes, as Calihye had noted, his breeches were still rumped around his ankles. He placed the flute down beside him on his bed—or started to, but found he couldn’t quite let it go just then. With that realization came a sudden strength, and he dropped the flute, quickly stood, and pulled up his pants.

“So what is it?” Calihye asked him, and he looked at her with curiosity. “What is it that creates a perfect warrior such as Artemis Entreri?” she clarified.

His mind flashed back again to Memnon. An image of Belrigger flashed before him and he felt himself jerk.

He realized that he was holding the flute again.

Tosso-pash’s one-toothed leer flickered before him, and he threw the flute down on the bed.

“Training? Discipline?” Calihye asked.

Entreri snatched his shirt up from the chair and moved past her.

“Anger,” he said, and in such a tone that no further questioning would likely be forthcoming.



It stood as just another clay-stone rectangle in a sea of similar houses, an unremarkable structure a dozen feet across and half a dozen front-to-back. It had an awning, like all of its neighbors, facing the sea breeze that usually offered the only relief from Memnon’s unrelenting heat. There were no walls partitioning the house. A single threadbare curtain sectioned off a sleeping area, where his mother and father, Shanali and Belrigger—or Shanali and someone who had paid Belrigger—slept. For the boy there was just the floor of the common room. Once, when too many bugs had crawled around him, the boy had climbed on the table to sleep, but Belrigger had found him there and had beaten him severely for the infraction.

Most of the beatings had blended together in the haze of passing time, but that particular one, Artemis remembered clearly. Drunker than usual, Belrigger had taken to his back and rump with a rotted old board, and the battering had left several splinters in Artemis’s backside that had become infected and oozed white and greenish pus for days.

Shanali had come to him with a wet cloth to wipe those wounds. He

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remembered that. She had rubbed his backside gently, with motherly love, and though she had uttered a few scolding words, calling him foolish for not remembering Belrigger's rules, even those had come tinged with sympathy.

Was that the last time Shanali had treated him kindly? Was that the last gentle memory he had of his mother?

The woman who had handed him over to the merchant caravan a few months later hardly seemed like the same creature. She had even physically changed by that fateful day at the merchant's, had grown pale and sunken, and she couldn't speak a full sentence without pausing to catch her breath.

His mind recoiled from the image of that day, rushing back to Belrigger and Tosso-pash, the toothless and bristle-faced idiot who spent more time under Belrigger's awning than did Belrigger himself.

Tosso-pash came to him in flashing images—leering, always leering, and always leaning over him, always reaching for him. Even the man's words flashed in phrases Artemis had heard far too many times.

"I'm yer Papa-hal's brother.

"Ye call me Uncle Tosso.

"I can make ye feel good, boy."

Entreri's mind recoiled from those images, from those words, even more so than from the last image of his mother.

Belrigger had never done that, at least, had never chased him around the alleyways until his legs ached from the exertion, had never lain down beside him when he was trying to sleep, had never tried to kiss him or touch him. Belrigger hardly ever even acknowledged his existence, unless it was to administer another beating, or to lash out at him with a string of insults and curses.

He could only imagine that he had been a great disappointment to his father. What else could bring the man to such anger against him? Belrigger was embarrassed by the frail Artemis—ashamed and angry that he had to feed the boy, even if all he ever gave to Artemis was the stale crust of his bread or other morsels left over after he was done with his meal.

And even his mother had turned away from him, had taken the gold . . .

The fat merchant's flabby arms provided no warmth and no comfort.



Entreri woke in darkness. He felt the cold sweat all over his naked form; the blankets clung wetly to him.

The moment of panic subsided somewhat when he heard Calihye's steady

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breathing beside him. He moved to sit up, and was surprised to find that magical flute of Idalia lying across his waist.

Entreri picked it up and brought it before his eyes, though he could barely see it in the dim starlight slipping in through the room's single window. From its feel, both physically in his hands and in the emotional connection he had attained with it in his mind, he was certain that it was the same magical flute.

He paused for a moment to consider where he had placed the flute when he had gone to bed—on the lip of the wooden bed frame beside him, he recalled, and within easy reach.

So he had apparently scooped it up during his sleep, and it had brought him to those memories again.

Or were they even memories? Entreri had to wonder. Were the images flashing so clearly through his mind an accurate recounting of his childhood days in Memnon? Or were they some devilish manipulation by the always-surprising flute?

He remembered clearly that day with the caravan, though, and knew his flute-enhanced images of it were indeed correct. That memory of Memnon, the final and absolute betrayal by his mother, had followed Artemis Entreri for thirty years.

"Are you all right?" Calihye asked softly as he sat on the edge of the bed. He heard her shift behind him, then felt her against his back, leaning on him, her arm coming around to rub his chest and hold him close.

"Are you all right?" she asked again.

His fingers moving along the smooth curves of Idalia's flute, Entreri wasn't sure.

"You are tense," Calihye noted, and she kissed him on the side of the neck.

His reflexive movement showed her that he wasn't in the mood for any of that, though.

"Is it your anger?" the woman prodded. "Are you still thinking of that? The anger that created Artemis Entreri?"

"You know nothing," Entreri assured her, and shot her a look that even in the darkness she could sense warned her that she was walking on ground uninvited.

"Anger at who?" she asked anyway. "At what?"

"No, not anger," Entreri corrected, and he was talking to himself more than to her. "Disgust."

"At?"



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“Yes,” Entreri answered, and he pulled away and stood up.

He turned to Calihye. She shook her head and slowly slid off the bed to move to stand at Entreri’s side. She gently draped her arm behind his neck and leaned in close.

“Do I disgust you?” she whispered in his ear.

Not yet, Entreri thought, but did not say. But if you ever do, I will put a sword through your heart.

He forced that notion from his thoughts and put his hand over Calihye’s, then glanced sidelong at her and offered a comforting smile.