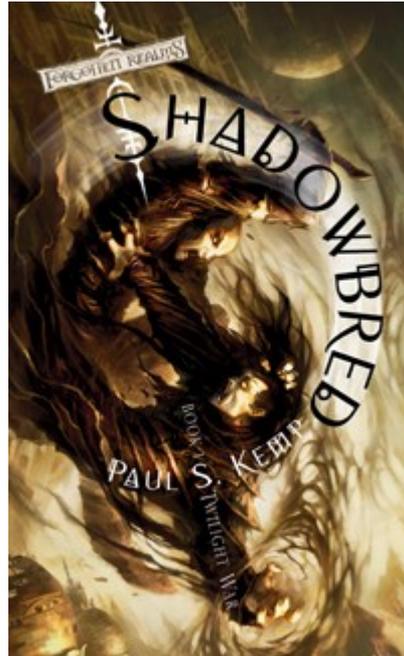


# *Shadowbred: Excerpt Two*

By Paul S. Kemp



He had been asleep only an hour, perhaps two. He had not even bothered to change his clothing before getting into bed. The stink of another night's travels, another night's killings, clung to his clothes.

Varra lay beside him, warm, soft, human. Her even breathing steadied his jumbled mind. He often lay awake through the night and listened to her breathe, watched the rise and fall of her breast. Since his transformation into a shade, he needed less and less sleep. But he always needed warmth; he always needed someone near him to remind him that he was still human, at least in part.

He drew the night about him and moved his body instantly across the room into the darkness near the shuttered window. Varra stirred slightly at his sudden absence but did not awaken.

Thunder rumbled again in the distance, the deep-chested growl of a beast. A storm was coming -- a big one. It had been a long while since they had seen rain.

In silence, Cale lifted the latch on the window shutters and gently pushed them open. Moonlight spilled into the cottage. Its touch gave Cale's arms stinging goose flesh. Tendrils of darkness swirled protectively across his skin.

A cloud bank loomed in the distance, bearing toward the cottage, devouring the stars as it came. Lightning split the sky, and its afterglow limned the clouds with a purple cast. Cale thought it ominous. Thunder quickly followed and Cale fancied the thunder had a voice.

Everything dies, it rumbled.

He searched the sky for Selûne and found her hanging low in a half-circle over the top of the forest, trailing the glowing cascade of her Tears. Cale could not look at the Tears without thinking of Jak.

Just about a year ago, he had seen the most powerful wizard he'd ever known pull one of the Tears from the Outer Darkness and use it to eclipse the sun. In the end, the wizard's reasons for doing so had been small ones, human ones, though the wizard had been far from human. Cale almost admired him for his reasons. But the admiration had not kept Cale from killing him, because the wizard's small reasons had led to the death of Cale's best friend.

Thunder rolled, soft, threatening, and mocking. Everything dies.

The memory of those days darkened Cale's already somber mood. The night answered his emotions and the air around him swirled with black tendrils. Behind him, Varra turned in her sleep.

"I still blame you," he whispered to Mask.

When he looked back on the scenario involving the wizard, Cale saw the Shadowlord's manipulation in all of it. Through his scheming, Mask had managed to steal an entire temple of Cyric. The whole plot had been little more than divine burglary, petty theft. And it had cost Cale his humanity and Jak his life. Cale could not forgive Mask for exacting so high a price.

Before Jak had died, Cale promised his friend that he would try to be a hero. He had saved Aril and the halfling village, had done similar deeds throughout upcountry Sembia for months. But it did not feel like enough; he did not feel like himself. He missed his friends, missed . . . something he could not articulate.

He looked out on the dark forest meadow. An elm of middling size dominated the oval expanse of low, browning grass. Patches of wildflowers, mostly purplesnaps, daisies, and lady's slipper, dotted the meadow. Varra had tried transplanting the wildflowers into a more orderly arrangement, but the flowers she moved invariably died.

Despite the strange weather and lack of rain, Varra had managed to grow a thriving vegetable garden of cabbages, turnips, carrots, and beans. At Cale's request, she also grew pipeweed. Large stones from the nearby stream walled the vegetable garden to keep the rabbits at bay. The garden did not produce enough to live on, but Varra supplemented their needs with monthly trips to a nearby village, though she had been returning with less and less of late.

A table and two chairs sat under the elm. Cale had made them from forest deadwood. Not bad work. Varra loved to sit in the shade of the tree and watch the flowers in the sun. She had come out of the darkness of Skullport and

made the forest cottage and sun-drenched meadow in upcountry Sembia her home. Cale thought her amazing for that.

Cale had bought the cottage and its land from the heirs of a dead woodsman. The place belonged to him, but more and more he knew it wasn't his home. He remembered words Jak had spoken once -- For men like us, friends are home. Cale missed his friends. The time he'd spent in the cottage had been a welcome respite, but a temporary one. Something was coming for him, coming for him as certain as the storm. He was not sure how he would tell Varra. He looked back on her sleeping form and wondered if she already knew.

Their relationship was unusual. They had lived together a year but Cale knew little about her past, and made a point not to ask. She, in turn, respected his privacy in the same way. They shared a home, a bed, their bodies from time to time, but little else. Cale cared for her deeply, and she cared for him, but he knew he could not stay with her much longer.

He ticked the moments away as midnight drew closer. When Mask's holy hour was imminent, he let the shadows in the meadow steal into his mind, and willed himself into the darkness under the elm, near the two chairs. Always keen of ear, and even sharper of ear in darkness, Cale heard the fauna stalking the woods, the chirp of crickets, the soft coo of the nightjar that nested on the ground under the scrub, the rush of the wind through the forest.

He moved the chair so he could watch the storm approach over the woods. He reached into his pocket and took out the smooth, oval stone that Aril had given him.

"Shadowman," he said, and smiled. He treasured the stone.

The clouds ate more of the sky. Thunder rumbled its promise.

Cale ran his thumb over the smooth stone, thoughtful. He heard the hiss of approaching rain. The wind set the trees to swaying. Lightning cut the sky. Thunder boomed. He wondered if it would wake Varra. After so much time living underground, she still had not grown accustomed to thunderstorms.

He reached into another pocket and retrieved Jak's ivory-bowled pipe, the pipe Cale had taken from his dead friend as a token of remembrance. He took out a small leather pouch of pipeweed, grown in Varra's garden, and filled the pipe's bowl. He tamped, struck a tindertwig, and lit.

Midnight arrived. Cale felt it as a charge in his bones. Rain came with it.

A year ago, Cale would have spent the next hour in prayer, asking Mask to imprint his mind with the power to cast spells. But not any more. Cale had not prayed to Mask or cast a spell since Jak's death. He had created his own ritual for the midnight hour.

He took a draw on the pipe and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He watched the cloud dance between the raindrops and stream off into the night sky.

The elm shielded him from the worst of the rain, but he welcomed the downpour. It washed the stink of his travels from him. It lasted only a short time -- the rain never lingered.

Cale spent the next hours in his chair, listening to the wind, and communing not with his god, but with his past.

"I do not belong to you any more," he said to Mask. "And neither does the night."