

# **Shadowrealm**

**Paul S. Kemp**

For my readers. Thank you.

*The Prince of Peace, embraced the gloom, and walked the night alone....*

## Chapter One

For hours I pace the dark halls of the Wayrock's temple. The anxious stomps of my boots on stone are the wardrums of my battle with myself. Nothing brings peace to the conflict in my head. Nothing illuminates the darkness, dulls the sharp, violent impulses that stab at the walls of my self-restraint. The shadowwalkers trail me, as furtive as ghosts. I catch only glimpses of them from time to time but I know they are there. Perhaps Cale asked them to watch over me. Perhaps they have taken that charge upon themselves.

Later, I sit in the dining hall of the temple and eat the food the shadowwalkers set before me. I wonder, for a moment, how Riven gets food to the island, then wonder why I care.

Eating is mechanical, unfeeling, an exercise in fueling the soulless shell of my body. It brings me no pleasure. Nothing human does, not anymore. The shadowwalkers see to my needs, my meal, would see to my safety, were it necessary, but say little. They, creatures of darkness themselves, see something in me greater than mere darkness. They see the looming shadow of my father, the black hole of his malice, the dark hint of what I am becoming. I see it in their averted gazes, their quiet words in a language I do not understand. They are not afraid, but they are cautious, seeing in me one past redemption, one whose fall cannot be arrested but whose descent must be controlled lest I pull others down with me.

And perhaps they are correct. I feel myself falling, ever faster, slipping into night.

I consider murdering them, making them martyrs to being right. They would die, gurgling on blood, but content as they expire in the knowledge that they were correct about me.

"You're right," I say to them, and grin. My fangs poke into my lower lip, draw blood.

Their slanted eyes look puzzled. They speak to one another in their language and the shadows about them swirl in languid arcs.

I need only learn where they sleep, take them unawares, slit throats until I am soaked in blood....

I realize the path my mind has taken, how tightly I am holding my feeding knife. With effort, I put the feet of my thoughts on another path. I bow my head, ashamed at the bloodletting that occurred in my imagination.

My mind moves so seamlessly to evil.

I am afraid.

“I am not a murderer,” I whisper to the smooth face of the wooden table, and Nayan and his fellows pretend not to hear the lie.

But I *am* a murderer. I simply have not yet murdered. I will, given time. The good in me is draining away into the dark hole in my center.

My soul is broken. I am broken.

I am my father’s son.

I consider killing myself but lack the will. Hope, for me, has become the hateful tether that keeps me alive. I *hope* that I can live without doing evil, *hope* that I can heal before it is too late. But I fear my hope is delusion, that it is only the evil in me preventing suicide until I am fully given over to darkness, when hope will no longer be relevant.

I feel the shadowwalkers watching me again. Their gazes stir the cup of my guilt, my self-loathing.

“What are you looking at?” I shout at Nayan, at Vyrhas, at the small, dark little men who presume to judge me.

They look away, not out of fear, but out of the human habit of averting the gaze from the dying.

I hate them. I hate myself.

I hate, and little else.

Staring at the walls, at the shadow-shrouded men who think me lost, I realize that hope, whether real or illusory, is not reason enough to live. It will not sustain me any longer. Instead I will hold on for another reason – to take revenge for what has been done to me.

Rivalen Tanthul, my father, both must be made to pay, to suffer.

For an instant, as with every thought, I wonder which half of me has birthed such a desire. I decide that I do not care. Whether it is a need for justice, vengeance, or simple bloodlust, it is *right* and I will do it.

I look at my hands – they show more and more red scales every day – and realize I have used my knife to gouge a spiral into the wood of the table, a line that circles and circles until it disappear into its own center.

I stab the knife into the wood, filling the hole with violence.

Nayan steps across the room in a single stride, emerges from the shadows beside me, puts his hand on my shoulder. His grip is firm, not friendly, and I resist the urge to cut off his fingers.

“You are not well,” he says.

I scoff, my eyes still on the table. “No. I am not well.”

He will get no more from me and knows it. Shadows curl around him, around me. His grip loosens.

“We are here,” he says, his eyes on me.

I nod and he moves away, his expression unreadable.

I know his true concern – he fears I may be a danger to Cale and Riven, the Right and Left hands of Mask. He is right to fear, and once more I want to murder him for being right.

I close my eyes, put my thumb and forefinger on the bridge of my nose, try to find a focus, peace from the swirl of thoughts.

I cannot control my mind. It is a wild animal freed from the cage of its conscience.

Tears well in my eyes and I wipe at them furiously, hating my weakness.

I feel a faint twinge deep in my consciousness and it sits me up straight in my chair. It is vaguely familiar. The twinge distills to an ache, then an itch. At first I think it must be a false memory, another symptom of my mental deterioration, but it lingers, not strong, but steady.

I recognize it, then, and it sends a charge into me.

It is the mental emanations of the Source. Distant, faint, but undeniable.

The shadovar have reawakened it.

The familiar hunger comes over me, another empty hole that I need to fill, one born not in the evil of the soul but in the evil of the body – addiction. Surrendering to the need seems fitting and I do not fight it. The mental connection opens and I gasp at its feel. My body shudders.

I sigh, satisfied, for a moment at peace. I wonder how the Netherese keep the Source’s damaged consciousness functioning without me.

The question frees a flood of memories. I recall the dark-skinned servant creatures of the shadovar, the krinth, whose minds I broke, whose consciousnesses I altered, whose minds I turned as brittle as crystal. Useful for a time, but fragile. I remember their wails as I pried away the layers of their minds, the blood leaking from their ears. I feel shame, but the shame manifests as a giggle.

The shadowwalkers eye me, concerned at my outburst. The shadows cloaking them do not hide their mistrust.

“What is it?” Nayan asks in his accented common. He looks as if he might attempt to restrain me.

Contact with the Source reawakens my desire to use my mental powers despite the damage done to my mind by my father, despite the jagged edges of my brain that make the use of mind magic like walking on broken glass. I consider scouring Nayan’s mind clean, resist the impulse.

“It is nothing,” I say, but it is not nothing.

I no longer care if using the Source consumes me. With its power, I might yet have my revenge. It will kill me, but I would rather die an addict than live as I am.

Wouldn’t I?

The need for revenge grants me certitude.

I will use the Source’s power to make Rivalen Tanthul and my father pay.

Then I will die.

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Cale, Riven, and Abelar materialized in the darkness on a high rise overlooking the Saerbian refugee camp at Lake Veladon. Tents congregated on the shore like fearful

penitents. The glow of campfires lit the camp here and there. The reflected light of Selune's Tears made fireflies on the mirror of the lake's dark water.

Thunder rumbled behind them, in the east, heralding a storm. Rain was coming.

Cale's shadesight cut through the darkness and he saw the nearest team of armed and armored watchmen before they saw him. He hailed them and word that Abelar had returned spread like wildfire through the camp.

A few members of Abelar's company met them, armor chinking, smiles in their eyes. Displaced Saerbians followed more slowly, fear in theirs. Most stared at the shadows around Cale, at the hole in Riven's face where his eye should have been, and spoke in hushed whispers. Cale's shadow-sharpened hearing caught snippets of their conversations.

"Saved Elden Corrinthal, they say, but what is he? Shadovar?"

"Servant not of Lathander but a dark god...."

"Leave off, they are friends...."

Regg emerged from the press, his mouth a hard line behind his beard. Battle scars lined the rose of Lathander enameled on his breastplate. His face looked worn, creased with concern. He greeted Abelar with an armclasp, greeted Cale and Riven with a nod and an uncertain smile.

"You're well," he said to them all, but with his eyes on Abelar.

Abelar laughed, a single guffaw as coarse as a wood rasp.

Concern wrinkled Regg's brow. "Forrin?"

"Dead," Abelar answered, his voice hollow.

The Saerbians nearby who heard the news raised fists, called Forrin's death deserved. That news, too, would spread quickly.

"Is the war over then, Abelar?" asked a heavysset matron, her graying hair disheveled, her clothing road-stained.

"No, Merdith, it is not," Abelar said, then to Regg, "Where is my son?"

"With Jiiris. He fell asleep in your father's arms and we put him in your tent."

"That's good," Abelar said, his voice choked. "Good."

Regg put a hand on Abelar's shoulder. "Whatever happened, Abelar, the Morninglord...."



Abelar shook his head, the gesture as sharp as a blade. "It is night, Regg. No more of Lathander just now."

Regg looked as if Abelar had slapped his face. His arm dropped. Merdith gasped. Some of the other Saerbians nearby overheard Abelar's words, and uncertain, worried mutters moved through the throng.

"Abelar...." Regg began.

"Leave it alone, Regg," Riven said, and the softness in his tone surprised Cale. "Just take him to his son."

Regg's face flashed anger, but held it only a moment before he beat back whatever harsh words he might have said.

"Come, then. Your father will be pleased to see you, Abelar."

"And I him," Abelar said.

Cale thought Abelar's voice sounded like that of a man who had not slept in a tenday.

"How fare matters here?" Abelar asked.

"As it was when you...left. Watchmen guard the perimeter. Roen and the men lead patrols of the approaches. But we cannot remain here. If Forrin brings an army...I mean, if the army of the Overmistress comes...."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Abelar nodded, his eyes focused on some distant point on the water of the lake.

To Cale and Riven, Regg said, "I will see to shelter for you two. Rain is coming."

As if to make his point, thunder shook the sky to the east. Distant lightning lit the clouds. The crowd murmured. Some scrambled for the safety of their tents.

Cale shook his head. "Thank you, but unnecessary."

Abelar pulled his eyes from the lake, turned to face him. "What do you mean?"

"We cannot stay, Abelar. There is...much afoot."

Cale thought of Kesson Rel, Magadon, his promises to Mask and Mephistopheles. Shadows swirled around him, agitated, dark.

Abelar looked stricken, like Cale had punched him in the stomach. The circles under his eyes seemed drawn with charcoal. He had left more than Forrin's corpse behind in Fairhaven.

"I..." He trailed off, looked past Cale to the storm. "I have started down a path..."

"I know," Cale said. He remembered the day he had started down a similar path. Regg put a comforting hand on Abelar's shoulder, said nothing with words.

Abelar forced a smile at Regg, straightened up. "I would that you stay. The bulk of the Overmistress's army remains in the field and we are too few to face it. These people need to be led to safety. Stay. Both of you."

The statement touched Cale. He liked Abelar. Jak would have liked him, too.

"I advise against Selgaunt," Cale said. "The Hulorn has allied with the shadovar and is not to be trusted."

"You served the Hulorn, yes?" Abelar said.

"I did, but no longer." He thought of his last encounter with Tamlin. Harsh words between them had killed their past. "The shadovar steer him now. I think Daerlun is a better course for you, Abelar."

Abelar considered, nodded. "Daerlun, then. But I repeat my request – stay. Help us. Help...me."

Cale would have under other circumstances. He clasped Abelar's hand. "We will return if we can. As for the path you are on, turn from it. It can be done."

Riven cleared his throat, shifted on his feet.

Abelar's did not release Cale's hand. "How do you know? Did you?"

The shadows around Cale roiled, crawled up Abelar's arm. Abelar watched them coil around his forearm.

"No," Cale said. "But my path is different. We're different."

They stared at each other for a moment, one once in service to the light and drifting toward darkness, one in service to shadow and just drifting.

Thunder growled.

"Perhaps not as different as you think," Abelar said at last and released him.

Cale could say nothing to that.

“I owe you both much,” Abelar said, adopting a formal tone. “Thank you for saving my son. You will always be welcomed by the Corrinthals.”

“Thank you, Abelar,” Cale said.

He decided that the world dealt harshly with men like Jak and Abelar. It killed them or darkened them, but never left them in the light. The realization made him melancholy. He wished it were otherwise.

“We should see your son before we go,” Riven said, surprising Cale.

Regg, too, seemed taken aback, to judge from his expression.

“Of course,” Abelar said. “Come.”

A light rain started to fall as the men picked their way through the tents, wagons, and carts. The Saerbian refugees scurried for shelter. Fires sizzled, danced in the wind, expired.

Cale, Riven, and Regg pulled up their hoods but Abelar did not. He seemed to welcome the downpour. Cale understood. Understood, too, that rain could not wash away some stains.

Lightning lit the night. Thunder rumbled, lingered overlong, the sky with bloodlung.

They came to a tent near the center of the camp. The soft glow of a lantern leaked intermittently from the wind-whipped flap. Regg lifted the flap for them.

“I will find your father,” Regg said to Abelar. “It is good to have you back.”

Abelar thumped him on the shoulder as he entered the tent. Cale and Riven followed.

Within, Elden slept on a pile of blankets in one corner of the sparsely furnished tent, his head poking from the pile of furs and woolens. A red-haired woman in mail sat on a small chair near the maekshift bed. She stood when they entered, mail chinking, her face alight.

“Abelar,” she said with a smile that managed to be both questioning and welcoming.

“This is Jiiris,” Abelar said, as she crossed the tent. “One of my company. Jiiris, know Erevis Cale and Drasek Riven.”

Her gaze moved only reluctantly from Abelar. She nodded a greeting to Cale and Riven, her eyes taking them in, seeing the shadows that hung on Cale, the ghost of a sneer that hung perpetually on Riven's face. She had stubborn eyes, a soldier's eyes.

"Thank you for what you did for Elden," she said. "It was noble work."

Her self-assuredness reminded Cale of Brilla, the kitchen mistress of Stormweather. He suspected she would brook no foolery and liked her instantly.

Cale tilted his head in acknowledgment, while Riven sounded almost embarrassed.

"Not sure I've ever heard something I've done spoken of in such a way."

"Perhaps you should do such things more often, then," she chided. To Abelar, she said, "I am pleased to see you returned."

"And I am pleased to find you here upon my return."

She flushed at his words and Cale saw not stubbornness in her eyes, but the open vulnerability of affection.

"Are you...well?" she asked.

Abelar stiffened. "Later, Jiriis."

She nodded, gestured at Elden. "He has awakened twice asking for you. He would like for you to awaken him, I'm sure."

Abelar nodded; he looked at his son and his face colored, as if he were embarrassed over something. He walked across the tent, sat on the bed with his back to them. For a time he simply looked upon his son. He started to touch him twice, recoiled, finally brushed the boy's brow.

Elden murmured in his sleep.

For a time no one spoke. The moment was too pure for the pollution of words. Thunder rumbled, rain pattered on the tent, and Elden's hands emerged from the blankets to cradle his father's hand, the hand that had killed Malkur Forrin a half hour earlier.

Jiriis daubed her eyes.

In handcant, Riven signaled to Cale,

*See.*

Not a question, but a demand.

Cale did not understand.

Father and son held each other's hands in the bubble of the tent, each the satisfaction of the other's need. After a time, Abelar's body shook and it took Cale a moment to understand that he was sobbing. His tears were a confession.

Jiiris looked to Cale, a question in her own tear-streaked face.

Cale did not answer. He did not want to tell her that they had saved the son but lost the father. She would learn that soon enough. Instead, he whispered, "We must go. Help him as you can. We are his friends. Tell him so."

She nodded, pushed through the shadows around him to touch Cale's hand in gratitude.

Cale and Riven exited the tent, entered the night, the rain. Cale took Riven by the arm.

"What did you mean in there? When you signed 'see'?"

"I wanted you to see what was happening. Understand it."

Cale released Riven's arm. "I understood it."

"Did you?" The rain pressed Riven's hair to his skull. "We saved that boy, Cale, but you've got a look on your face like we didn't."

The shadows around Cale coiled, spun in wide ribbons.

"I've been killing men for most of my life, Cale. So have you. Reading a man's face comes with the job. And I can read you as well as any. What is it?"

Cale could not articulate his thoughts, the strange detachment he felt, even after saving Elden. He was not himself. Or he was himself and did not like what he was.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not...."

He let the thought die, shook his head.

Riven leaned in closer to him. Cale's shadows wrapped them both.

"You lied to Abelar about turning around."

Cale had no answer.

"There ain't no turning around. You know that."

Cale did know it, but he wanted there to be, and he knew that he would tell Abelar the same lie again.

"Sometimes we need lies. He needed it."

Riven stared at him, stepped back, his expression as fixed as that of a golem.

“What?” Cale asked.

Green lightning lined the eastern sky, cast Riven’s face in alternating fields of light and shadow. Thunder boomed, once, twice, again, again. He and Riven both turned at the sky’s outburst and the moment was lost.

The distant clouds, cast in streaks of vermillion, blackened the sky, made it a void. They stretched fully across the eastern horizon, not mere clouds but a wall of pitch, an absence of light.

The prolonged roll of thunder summoned refugees from their tents in ones and twos, all of them looking east to the tenebrous sky, shielding themselves from the rain. Jiiris stepped from the tent behind them.

She looked east as lightning flashed.

“That is not a storm born of nature,” she said.

Cale agreed, and the shadows about him swirled in answer to the churning sky.

Abelar emerged, too. He held Elden tightly against him and put his other arm around Jiiris. She leaned into him and Cale thought that some wall between them had fallen. Faith had been supplanted by something more earthly.

Cale thought of Varra, the last woman he had held in his arms. A similar wall had stood between them and he’d never been able to breach it. Faith, or fate, seemed to leave him little room for ordinary needs. Perhaps that was what plagued him. He felt inhuman because he did so little that was human.

“Wizardry out of Ordulin,” Abelar said.

“Look at it,” Jiiris said. “All of eastern Sembia will be caught in it.”

Jiiris was right, and when the import of her words registered, Cale cursed.

“What is it?” Riven asked.

Cale drew the darkness about him. “Varra.”

Riven looked puzzled for a moment, then recognition lit his face. “Varra? The woman from Skullport?”

“Wait for me here,” Cale said, and the shadows about him deepened. He pictured in his mind the cottage where he and Varra had spent a year, the cottage in which he’d left her behind, the cottage that was or soon would be within the magical storm.

“Cale, we stay together,” Riven said. “I’ll come. Cale.”

Cale hesitated for a moment, nodded, and extended the darkness to Riven.

Abelar stared at Cale, at the darkness as it gathered, his expression thoughtful.

“Return if you can,” Jiriis said. “We will need you here.”

Cale nodded as the shadows whisked him and Riven across Sembia.

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Rain drizzled from the dark sky. The low rumble of thunder from the east promised a still heavier downpour. The smell of Saerb, reduced to damp ash, still hung in the air, or perhaps simply lingered in Regg’s memory. The smell of Saerb’s dead, thankfully, did not.

Reht pulled up the hood of his cloak and slogged through the camp. A few stubborn bonfires tended by equally stubborn soldiers smoked and sizzled in the wet. Eyes watched him pass and he left murmured questions in his wake.

The men had already heard. Reht should have known. Stories went through camp faster than a plague of the trots, even in the dead of night.

He reached the center of the camp where a crowd of soldiers stood around Forrin’s large tent. The pennons on the center pole snapped in the breeze. Lantern light poured out of the tent’s open flap. Reht saw Enken and two others within. He pushed through the press, nearly slipping in the mud.

“They got the General, Reht,” one of the men said as he passed.

“What are we doing about it?” said another.

Reht decided to take a moment to remind the men that they were and remained soldiers, whatever the fate of their General. He stopped, pulled back his hood, and stared into one face after another.

“What will be done about it is what your commanders order you to do. And that will be in due time. Meanwhile, if any man standing here is supposed to be standing a post, I will personally string him by the balls for dereliction of duty. Saerbian forces are in the field and they could be mustering for a counterattack. Rain and darkness are not armor. Am I understood?”

A chorus of “Aye, sirs” and averted gazes answered his words.

Enken stood with Strend and Hess inside the tent. The rain beat staccato off the canvas. Enken nodded a greeting and Strend and Hess saluted. Hess's moustache drooped as much as the man's shoulders. Strend, as barrel-chested as a dwarf, shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

At a glance, everything within the tent seemed in order. There was no blood, no items tossed about. It appeared as though General Forrin had simply stepped out to the privy.

“What exactly happened here?” Reht asked.

Hess and Strend hesitated, looked one to the other.

“Tell him what you told me,” Enken said to Hess. “Neither of you is at fault here.”

Hess eyed Reht and shook his head. “We heard a shout, Commander, and rushed in. We saw a man—“

“Wasn't a man,” Strend said, shaking his head and crossing his arms over his chest.

“The Hells,” Hess said. “It was a man, but not normal. He was dark, with shadows all around him. He saw us, the tent went dark, and then he was gone with the General.”

“Shadovar,” Reht said. They had heard that forces out of Shade Enclave had allied with the Selgauntans and Saerbians.

Enken grunted agreement, pulled one of his many knives and ran his thumb across it edge. “My thoughts as well.”

Strend looked nervous, eyed the dark pockets in the corners of the tent. “Shadovar. I've heard things.”

“Tales and naught else,” Enken said, pointing his blade at the young soldier. “Shadovar bleed as well as any and better than some.” He looked to Reht. “We could turn the clerics on to this shadovar's scent. Follow him. They must have wanted the General alive or they would have killed him here.”

“Agreed,” Reht said.

Hess looked like he'd eaten bad beef. “He warned us not to follow.”

Reht and Enken stared blades at the boy. “What? Who?”



“The shadovar.”

“And?”

“And...that is all,” said Hess and looked away.

Enken grunted in disgust, took Hess by the back of his cloak and shoved him toward the tent flap.

“You left your balls out in the rain, soldier. Get out there and find him ‘ere I see you again.”

Reht, Enken, and Strend chuckled at Hess’s expense as he sulked his way out of the tent. The moment he stepped from outside the questions from the loiterers flew as heavy as the rain.

“Lorgan has not reported back,” Enken said. “That leaves the rank to you or me.”

“Fight you for it?” Reht said.

Enken smiled, showing one his chipped front teeth. He sheathed his knife. “I would but we can’t afford to lose you.”

Reht chuckled.

Enken said, “You’re longer in the Blades, anyway, known the General and the men longer. You take it.”

Reht considered, nodded. He had always been a tactician, a leader of small units, not a strategist. But he could assume command until the Overmistress replaced Forrin with another general.

“When Lorgan shows, he’ll rank me and can have it.”

“*If* Lorgan shows,” Enken said. “His silence bodes ill. Meantime, keep a light around you. Shadovar seem to have a liking for anyone leading this army.”

Reht smiled but it was forced. To Strend, he said, “Take Hess and get me Mennick, and Vors and the rest of the Talosians. Let’s find out what happened here.”

Strend saluted and started to bound from the tent.

“Wait,” Reht said, and Strend stopped.

“Sir?”

“Bring the Corrinthal boy back with you, too. Vors is done watching over him.”

Strend nodded and hurried out, and they heard him call for Hess.

“Vors,” Enken said, and spit as if the name itself left a foul taste.

Reht thought that said everything that needed said. He walked the confines of Forrin's tent, trying on his new rank, looking over Forrin's personal effects. Forrin had traveled light, still a mercenary footman despite his rank.

"Blade and armor are gone," Reht said to Enken.

"I noticed."

"Could be the General gave a fight before Hess and Strend entered the tent."

"Could be. But if so, it wasn't much of a fight."

"Bold, taking him out of his own tent," Reht said.

Enken nodded, his expression thoughtful.

Reht did not have an eye for clues or a head for mysteries. He'd leave it to Mennick and the priests. He turned his thoughts back to his men, his army, things he understood.

"Extra discipline with the men for a time, to keep things in order while they stomach the news. We'll need to get word to the Overmistress."

"Agreed to both," Enken said. "If she replaces you with someone political, I think the Blades will take it ill."

Reht nodded, listened to the patter of rain, pondered his course. A third of his forces under Lorgan had not reported back. Likely they had been delayed by the weather or cut off by Saerbian forces. He knew a sizeable force of Saerbians had mustered on the shores of Lake Veladon. He suspected Endren Corrinthal was among them.

Reht was inclined to meet them in the field. He knew that Forrin's orders had been to raze Saerb and disrupt any potential muster of Saerbian forces. They'd razed Saerb but at least a partial muster had gone forward anyway.

"I am tempted to move against the Saerbians at Lake Veladon."

"The commanders will support that," Enken said. "Gavist and I had been advocating as much with Forrin before...this."

"Well enough. It'll give the men a focus. Call the commanders together."

Enken saluted, grinning through his beard the while, and stepped out the tent.

"Reht has command until further notice!" Reht heard him shout to the gathered men outside. "Pass the word."

They would assemble the army with the dawn and formally announce Reht's promotion with all the assembled commanders at his side. He expected no resistance. He knew he was respected, even liked. He'd led many of the men in the army personally, fought beside them, bled beside them. They would follow him for as long as he had command.

Still, he felt himself smaller than the task, a halfling in a giant's boots. He did not have Forrin's nose for strategy. The weight of authority felt heavy on his shoulders. He'd have to rely on his commanders.

He found a bottle of Forrin's wine and two tin chalices in a small chest. Spurning the chalices, he pulled the cork with his teeth and took a long swallow directly from the bottle. It'd be the last he had for a time.

A commotion from outside the tent rose above the sound of the rain. Reht set down the bottle and started out but before he did Strend burst into the tent, dripping rain, breathless, his face red from exertion.

"Speak, boy," Reht said.

"They killed Vors, too," Strend blurted. "And the Corrinthal boy is gone."

"Damn it." Reht strode past Strend and out of the tent. Two dozen gazes settled on him as he emerged. He stopped and looked his men in the eye. He kept his tone even but authoritative.

"Stand your posts, stay alert, and do your duty. We will avenge all that has happened."

Nods and grudging acknowledgements from all around.

Reht saluted, was answered in kind by all the men in eyeshot, and walked through the camp. As he passed, men saluted, hailed him as Commander. Word had spread.

On the way to Vors's tent, he met Gavist, a skilled junior commander who could not yet grow a full beard. Gavist, too, saluted him.

"I am tired of that already," Reht said.

Gavist smiled.

Reht said, "The General is taken and Vors is dead."

Gavist's young face showed no emotion. "I heard as much."

"Anyone else?" Reht asked.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Gavist said.

“Precise strike,” Reht said.

They fell in together and marched through the camp. By the time they reached Vors’s tent, they pulled two score soldiers in their wake.

Othel stood at the entrance to Vors’s tent and greeted Reht and Gavist with a nod. Reht was thankful Othel did not salute.

“Ugly in there, Commander,” Othel said.

Reht stepped through the tent’s flap and looked inside.

“Tempus’s blade,” he swore.

Vors lay on the ground in the center of the tent, his breastplate at his side. A spear impaled his guts, stuck out of his body like an oriflamme. His open eyes, glassy and swollen from a beating, stared upward at nothing. His mouth hung open in an unfinished scream of pain. Blood caked his lips, his beard. The pungent, sour stink of blood and worse hung thick in the tent.

Vors had died in pain, prolonged and deliberately inflicted. He would have taken a quarter hour or more to die with the spear in his belly.

Gavist chewed his upper lip, as if feeling for the non-existent moustache with his teeth. “Looks personal. And why take the boy?”

“The shadovar are allied with Selgaunt and Selgaunt is allied with Saerb,” Reht said. “The Corrinthals are important among the Saerbians. Rescuing the boy makes sense, either to earn goodwill or use as leverage.” He nodded at the slaughter. “Not sure why the assassin would do it this way, though.”

“Vengeance for the boy?” Othel said.

Reht thought it might be possible. “No one heard anything?”

Othel shook his head.

“What is it?” some of the soldiers shouted from outside the tent. “What happened in there?”

Reht made his expression neutral, stepped out of the tent to face them. They blinked in the rain. “Vors is dead. A spear through the gut.”

Expressions turned angry, fists shook. No one had liked Vors except his fellow priests, but he had been one of their company.

“Someone pays for this in blood,” boomed a voice from the crowd, and the four other Talosians in the army, their unkempt hair flattened against their heads by the rain, wild eyes glaring, elbowed their way through the press.

Reht stepped forward to meet them, cut them off from entering Vors’s tent. Kelgar, the big warpriest, almost bumped him. Almost.

“Agreed, Kelgar. But it happens my way, and only on my orders.”

The tall warpriest’s wild eyes fixed on Reht. Spit flew when he spoke. “And who are you to me?”

Reht eased forward into Kelgar’s space, nose to nose. The men watching fell silent. The priest stood a hand taller than Reht, and a stone heavier.

“Your Commander, which means you follow my orders. Understood?”

“A Son of Thunder is dead, murdered.” More spit.

“He is. But in this army, you answer to me first, to your god second. Otherwise, you ride off now. Find the slaughter you seek somewhere else.”

“You disliked Vors. We know what happened on the last raid.”

“I hated him passionately,” Reht said, eliciting a growl from Kelgar. “But he was a soldier in this army. My army. That is all that matters.”

The Talosian stared into Reht’s eyes, measuring him. Reht gave no ground.

Finally the priest smirked, stepped back, and nodded. No spit.

“Well enough....Commander.”

Reht stepped aside and let them through. “We’ll have a council with all the junior commanders in one hour. You are to be there.”

Kelgar grunted agreement and entered the tent with his fellows. The moment they saw the carnage they shouted curses and blood oaths.

Gavist and Othel scrambled out of the way and Reht stood in the tent’s doorway as the warpriests honored their dead by howling over his body and destroying his possessions, overturning tables, shattering glass, slashing carpets and bedding. Reht had seen it before. Talos reveled in destruction and battle. So did his priests. The Talosians would pile up the wreckage and set it all aflame with a summoned lightning strike before dawn.

As if in answer to the funereal rage of the Talosian warpriests, the sky rumbled with thunder, a lasting peal that reached a booming crescendo.

“Double the men on guard duty,” Reht said to Gavist, and the young junior commander nodded.

“You think the assassins might return?”

“I don’t. Vors, at least, looks to have been personal. But we may as well take precautions. Taking Forrin could be a precursor to an attack.”

Mennick, the army’s most powerful wizard, strode through the men as the chaos within the tent from the Talosians became its own storm. Magic kept Mennick’s dark robes and gray-streaked hair shielded from the rain.

“You’ve heard?” Reht asked.

Mennick’s eyes clouded over. He’d known Forrin for many years. “Yes.”

“Mages are at work in this,” Reht said. “Shadovar mages. Do what you can to prevent this from happening again.”

“I can raise some wards,” Mennick said. “I should start with you.”

“Fine. Inform the Overmistress via sending, then find out who did this and where they are.”

Mennick nodded, looked over and past Reht in thought, brow grooved.

Lightning flashed and his eyes widened. He pointed at the horizon.

“Look at that.”

Reht turned to see pitch devour the eastern sky. Not stormclouds, but a churning fog of impenetrable night. Streaks of green lightning sliced through it at intervals. An uneasy murmur went through the gathered men as the darkness expanded.

“Not natural,” Mennick said.

“Shadovar?” Reht asked.

Mennick shrugged. “Seems likely.”

“Shadovar troops could be moving under cover of that storm,” Gavist said.

“Possible,” Mennick said. “They take Forrin, thinking to disrupt our command, then attack under cover of darkness.”

Reht nodded, thoughtful. The storm was moving west toward them, bracketing Reht’s army between it and the Saerbian forces. He liked it little. He decided he would

not sit idle while his enemies determined the field of battle. He had thought to march against the Saerbians, but now he had a different target, one whose agents had attacked his camp.

“Sound the muster,” Reht said to Gavist. “Get the men geared up. We’re moving into that storm. We take the fight to them.”

Gavist saluted, headed off.

“Scouts forward with half hour reporting,” he shouted to Gavist’s back. “And double the scouts to the rear. I do not want the Saerbians taking us unawares. And get some scouts in the field looking for Lorgan.”

A raised hand acknowledged the orders and the camp soon erupted in activity.

Reht walked among his men, watching the approaching storm. It was still hours away, given its slow advance. In his mind’s eye, he imagined the Saerbian forces marching from Lake Veladon, thinking to catch Reht in a vise.

“Not likely,” he said. He would engage the shadovar as soon as possible. After defeating them, he’d turn and finish the approaching Saerbians.

Behind him, the Talosians ignited Vors’s body, his possessions, his tent. Their roars of rage chased the smoke into the dark sky.

The next day would bring battle.

Once, the prospect would have lit a fire in his belly. Now, it kindled only a spark. A long life of soldiering had shaped Reht into a certain kind of man, and sometimes he tired of himself. He’d almost been apprenticed in his adolescence to a cartographer but the man had taken on another instead, a nephew. Reht had always loved maps, still did. He wondered what his life would have been like had he spent it as a mapmaker. Would he have married? Had children? Certainly he’d have had fewer scars.

He shook his head, rebuking himself for being sentimental. He had made his choice, had put aside maps for steel.

Donning his helmet, he put cartography and regrets out of his mind and saw to the preparation of his army.

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