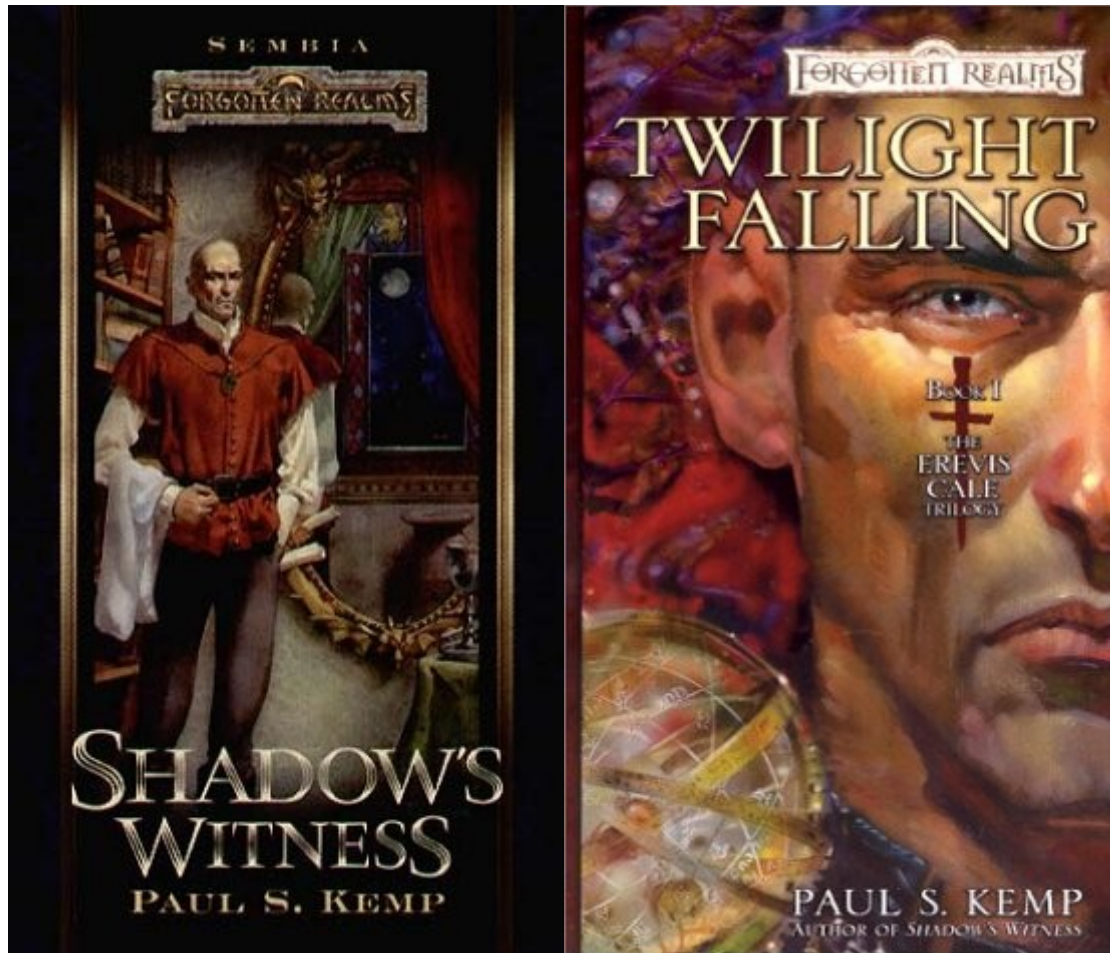


# *And All the Sinners, Saints*

By Paul S. Kemp



Cale awoke to a darkened room, the voice of his god dancing tiptoe across the surface of his still sleep-slowed brain. He lay in bed with his eyes open, sweating. After a few heartbeats, his vision began to adjust to the thin beams of Selûne's light filtering through his shuttered window. Furniture took shape in the darkness, gray shapes whose familiarity helped bring calm: his sitting chair, dressing table and reading lamp. He was still at home in the Halls of Stormweather. Not . . . elsewhere.

For the last tenday or so, Mask had invaded his dreams, showed him alien landscapes, dark and windswept, and whispered hauntingly in Cale's ears. In the strange, twilight moments between sleep and full wakefulness, the Shadowlord spoke to him words of power. Prayers, Cale knew. Magical incantations. While he remembered only hazy echoes of the visions shown him by Mask, the Shadowlord's words he remembered with precise clarity, as though they had been etched into his consciousness.

His consciousness? He almost laughed aloud. Since accepting the Call of Mask, he had become less and less certain of where his consciousness ended and that of Mask began. His recent dreams only served to make the distinction still more uncertain. You can serve and still be your own man, he reminded himself. Jak Fleet, Cale's friend and a priest himself, had told him as much. But Cale felt unsure. Serving Mask seemed different than Jak's service to Brandobaris. Mask seemed to want more than mere service. Cale felt an agenda. Had Mask called him to serve some greater purpose?

He stared at the dark ceiling. "Is that what this is about?"

Mask, of course, made no answer.

Cale, however, knew how he might encourage an answer from the Shadowlord. His dreams had provided him a way.

He lay still for a time, thinking, debating, then came to a decision. He was tired of the disembodied words, the cryptic nonsense. He was a priest, true, but he need not passively accept Mask's piecemeal revelations. With a single spell, he could commune with his god directly and perhaps -- perhaps -- gain a clearer picture of Mask's purpose.

And whether or not he agreed with it.

His mind made up, he leaned over to the small table beside his bed and reignited his reading lantern from the nightwick. The soft orange flame sent shadows dancing across the walls. He took his holy symbol, the soft, black mask he had taken from the Night Knives' guildhouse, from the secret compartment in his night table drawer and sat up in bed. The words of the commune spell filled his mind.

He rose, walked to his cushioned reading chair, and sat.

No better place to be when he met his god, he supposed.

His mouth felt dry; his palms clammy. He stared into the lantern's flame, trying to calm himself. He took a deep breath and focused. When he felt ready, he held the soft velvet of the mask between thumb and forefinger and began to recite the prayer.

The moment he began to mouth the power-laden words, shadows peeled from the walls and swarmed around him, encapsulating him in a shroud of darkness. He felt motion upward, as though his soul had separated from his body and taken flight. A roar like rushing water filled his ears. He gritted his teeth and spoke the final words to the invocation. The roar grew in intensity. His consciousness shot upward with the speed of a shooting star.

Sudden silence. Darkness. A void. Then . . . .

He sensed the presence of Mask, an overpowering darkness, a seductive malice. He saw an outline framed against the void. A slim figure, a man.

He wanted to ask questions and demand answers, but no words came. At least not from him.

Observe, said a voice in his head. Cale heard a threat in that voice, and a smile. The outlined figure of Mask bled into the darkness and became indistinguishable. Cale stood alone in the void.

An expanse took shape before him: buildings, towers, walls, lights. Selgaunt in miniature. Cale towered over it. In the sky above shone . . . not Selûne, but a grinning skull surrounded by tears, the symbol of Cyric the Dark Sun. On the other side of the city, also towering over it, stood a man cloaked in purple. He seemed not to notice Cale but eyed the city with hungry eyes. The light from the skull-moon cast his smooth, narrow face in a sinister light. Cale had never seen him before. Hovering over the man was a twisted ivory rod. It moved as though waved by an invisible hand, and buildings collapsed into rubble.

Cale knew what that rod represented -- power. And danger to Selgaunt.

The rod is to be your symbol, said the voice in his head, after you have rooted out its evil and slain its bearer.

Cale started to protest. He was no assassin. Not anymore. But he kept his mouth shut. How could he lie to his god? Mask knew him, knew who and what he was. Denials were futile.

"Is this my --" He stopped in mid-sentence to correct himself. "Your purpose?"

Look more closely. See your purpose. Or part of it.

Cale peered more closely at the man and saw the darkness behind him, an area of deeper shadow shaped vaguely like a man. Two eyes formed in the darkness, fixed on Cale. Cale leaned forward to see. . . .

And found himself staring into the flame of his lamp.

"Dark," he swore. It took him a few minutes to regain his bearings. What in the Nine Hells had just happened? More cryptic nonsense. But then, what had he expected? A face-to-face with the Shadowlord? A chat over an ale, maybe? He smiled at the thought.

No, he had seen what he had seen. And now he could act on it, or ignore it.

Mulling the choice, he climbed to his feet, blew out the lantern, and climbed back into bed. Whether he decided to pursue Mask's geas or not, he knew he needed to be well rested. Tomorrow he and Thamalon were to attend a small reception at the Hulorn's Palace. All the key players of the Old Chauncel would be there, as would the Hulorn and his idiotic eccentricities. Cale would need his wits about him.

Riven knew he was dreaming. He tried to wake himself by force of will, but could not.

He hovered high in the air over Selgaunt. Night cloaked the city, and the street torches sparkled in the darkness. Strangely, the streets were devoid of traffic.

From near the Hulorn's palace, furtive motion drew his eye. Riven willed himself to move. He floated toward the ornate, gilded palace of Selgaunt's ruling dolt. Far below him, he saw a thin, rat-faced man in purple robes. In his hand, the man held a twisted black staff. Riven sensed its power, and craved it.

It is powerful, said a voice from nowhere.

His own voice?

The man waved the staff before the walls of the palace and a ripple ran through the structure. Smiling, the man reached down and lifted the corner of the building as though it were a carpet. The palace lay bare, exposed. A bronze holy symbol on a thin chain escaped the man's robes as he bent to enter -- a grinning skull surrounded by tears. The symbol of Cyric the Mad, Riven knew.

The man, holding a corner of the Hulorn's palace in one hand and the staff of power in the other, peered nervously around, alert for danger. Riven memorized his face before he wormed his way under the foundation and vanished from sight.

Riven wanted that staff. With it, he could start his own organization. Not big, not obvious; but a small guild of highly skilled professional killers.

Its power can be yours, said the voice, softly, if you but swear yourself to me.

Riven began to suspect then who it was who had invaded his dreams.  
"Who are you?"

Laughter. Below him, Selgaunt vanished, replaced by a swirl of shadows backlit by stars. Up became down, and a pair of eyes stared out of those shadows -- youthful but knowing, piercing. Riven could hear the smile in the voice.

You know who I am.

He did. At least he thought he did. He knew that his rival Cale had somehow turned to Mask and become a priest. Riven had reason to suspect that Mask had reached out to him as well, but he had resisted. Since then, he had rethought his views. The last time he and Cale had fought, Cale had cast a spell to defeat him. Being a priest gave Cale an edge.

Cale had enough edges.

The eyes pierced him. Shadows swirled.

Swear, the voice prodded.

It took Riven only a heartbeat to decide. If Mask promised power, Riven would take it -- on his terms.

"If you think I'm priest material," Riven said, "you're dead wrong."

The eyes suggested a grin. I know exactly what you are.

Riven gave a nod. "Then I --"

He found himself staring upward at the dark ceiling of his room. "-- swear," he finished, momentarily confused. Torchlight from one of the streetlamps on Larawkan Lane filtered through the shutter slats. Shadows filled his spartanly furnished flat.

He threw the blanket from his body and sat up. The dream remained vivid in his memory. He had sworn himself to a god. Or had he? He reached for his weapons belt, hanging from the headboard of his bed, and withdrew one of his magical sabres. Its weight felt good in his hand. Real. Unlike the unreality of the dream. Metal was Riven's god, in the form of coins and blades.

He chuckled while he dressed. He didn't need a god. He needed a drink, and a woman. He had enough fivestars to keep him in both for the rest of the night.

"What a bunch of horsedung," he said aloud, and threw on his trademark scarlet cloak. He hadn't sworn to anything. It was his dream, and his dream was his own. He served no man or god, except on his terms.

He pulled on his cloak. Motion caught his eye. A black piece of cloth fluttered to the floor from an inner pocket. A chill ran up the nape of his neck. He stared at the cloth for a long second before his mind registered what it was. A mask. A black mask. He had never seen it before.

"Son of a whore," he muttered.

Paintings of malformed, hybrid creatures decorated the wood-paneled walls of the reception hall in the Hulorn's palace. Perytons, owlbears, and chimerae glared from the walls and snarled with lifelike ferocity. Expensive carpets depicting similar creatures covered the floor. Tapestries draped the front of the balconies that overlooked the hall from high on three of the four walls. Cale scowled when he considered the amount of coin squandered by Selgaunt's fool ruler on artists and trinkets. Cale had taken less coin to kill men . . . years and years ago.

In the center of the carpeted hall stood three long, polished oaken tables. Selgaunt's Old Chauncel sat around the tables in plush, high-backed chairs like so many overdressed peacocks. The city's merchant patriarchs laughed, bargained, and forged alliances while they dined and drank. Mostly drank. Except for Thamalon. Cale's lord never drank more than one chalice of wine when business was afoot. And in Sembia, business was always afoot.

Despite the fact that he had called the gathering, the Hulorn had not yet made an appearance. Typical. Cale felt sure that the city's ruler was mad. He habitually wore oversized, hooded cloaks -- seemingly to hide his features -- and was only rarely seen in public. Rumors were running through the city like shite through a cowbird. To stay sharp until the Hulorn made his appearance, Cale did what he always did -- gathered information for his lord. Unfortunately, the conversation among the members of the Old Chauncel was an indistinguishable hum, even to Cale's exceptionally keen ears. He read lips where he could, but chalices and forks interfered with even that, and he learned nothing worth knowing.

Like Cale, the servants of the rest of the Old Chauncel patriarchs stood at station along the wall behind their respective lords. Collectively, they formed a perimeter of flesh around the hall. In accordance with the custom for mass meetings of the Old Chauncel, each merchant noble had brought along only one trusted man -- a wolmoner, in the tongue of ancient Sembia. The term translated roughly as "wall man" or "vigil man," and meant, in its original sense, a bodyguard and advisor. Over the centuries, however, the nature of the office had changed. Today, the vigilman was usually a mere servant. Sometimes, however, he was a bodyguard, and sometimes was even a spy. In Cale's case, he was all three. The perfect wallman of old.

He scanned the room, eyed each patriarch's man in turn. He could often deduce something of the master's intentions for the meeting by observing the nature and mannerisms of the master's man. If nothing else, it might indicate to him on whom exactly he should focus.

Cale figured the "servant" waiting on Kosos Deenth to be a soldier in disguise, for his posture and manner fairly screamed "military." House Deenth believed Kosos needed a bodyguard then. Why? Was he at odds with the Hulorn?

Elsewhere, a slim sycophant overdressed in green velvet threaded with gold served Armin Thest, no doubt to highlight House Thest's wealth in recently securing a lucrative spice transporting contract with the Priakos trading coster. There --

Cale stopped. Stared.

In the gather of men along the wall behind Lords Talendar and Liamos stood Drasek Riven. The Zhent assassin was disguised as a servant, but Cale recognized him nevertheless. No disguise could hide Riven's signature sneer, nor his predatory, one-eyed glare. Both had bloodied the other in battles past, and both had promised to do so again.

Their gazes met. And locked.

Riven's one eye went wide with recognition for only an instant before he regained his composure. His sneer deepened. His right hand vanished into an inner pocket of his tunic and remained there. He had a weapon, no doubt.

In the space of three breaths, a thousand thoughts raced through Cale's mind. Had the Hulorn or another family of the Old Chauncel allied with the Zhents?

With their gazes still locked, Riven began to glide slowly along the wall toward Cale. Cale did the same, toward Riven.

Then Cale remembered that he was unarmed. He scanned those near him. There! A member of the Hulorn's Palace Guard with his eyes toward the tables. Cale veered toward the guard, passed near enough to brush his cloak. As he did, he lifted the man's dagger, inverted the weapon so the blade ran along his wrist up the sleeve, and returned his gaze to Riven.

They continued to close. Ten paces. Seven. Cale didn't know what he was going to do, but he was sure it would be messy. Five.

Trumpets blared from above. Both men froze and looked up.

From the balconies overlooking the tables, the Hulorn's heralds blew another clarion. The palace steward's voice rang out from the balcony along the northern wall.

"Gentlemen. His most esteemed lordship, the highest of the Old Chauncel, the Hulorn of the city."

A scattering of a soft applause from the merchant lords greeted this announcement, only enough to not give offense.

The Hulorn stepped forward to the balcony's rail. He wore a blue satin cloak, heavily embroidered, and a half-mask that hid much of his face. When he spoke, Cale thought his voice sounded strangely enervated.

"My lords, I thank you for answering my summons upon such short notice. I trust the meal has been satisfactory?"

The lords murmured approval.

"Excellent. I hope you will forgive my absence. My health has been . . . inconsistent of late."

More murmuring.

"You are all busy men, and no doubt wonder at my purpose. I will not keep you in suspense. It is simply this: I have appointed a Proxy."

The room was utterly silent for a moment, then exploded in conversation. Surprise, alarm, shouted questions. Cale too was taken aback. The office of Proxy had stood empty for over fifty years, and for good reason. The Hulorn was obligated by the iron manacles of Sembian custom to stand above the rivalries of the Old Chauncel, to arbitrate, to mediate, and to act for the good of the whole. The Proxy was bound by no such obligation, yet the office spoke for the Hulorn. The house of the Proxy became the preeminent house in the city, ostensibly second to that of the Hulorn, but unbound by the social customs that held the Hulorn in check. A Proxy could freely favor his own house, and only the Hulorn stood in his way.

The Hulorn risked much in appointing a Proxy, Cale knew. A Proxy provided a legitimate means for the Hulorn to act outside of his social constraints; but history had shown that ambitious Proxies could bring down a Hulorn. The city's ruler was either very clever, or very stupid. Cale figured the latter.

The Hulorn let the murmuring continue for a time before he went on. "You are all no doubt wondering which house I will favor." He let the suspense build for a moment. "None. No house. Marden, step forward."

Necks craned. Eyes narrowed.

"Gentlemen, I present to you Marden Cantor, my Proxy and hand, with full authority to act in my name and stead. He is not Sembian, but will serve Selgaunt well."

The patriarchs of the Old Chauncel were too stunned even to applaud.

Marden stepped to the balcony's edge to stand beside the Hulorn. His purple velvet robes shooshed loud in the silence. He obviously deemed the quiet an affront. His eyes narrowed and his thin lips pulled back from his teeth.

"I look forward to hearing your . . . requests, gentlemen." His voice was a serpent's hiss.

Cale recognized him the moment he stepped forward, though he did not bear the rod from Cale's dream. The Proxy was the servant of Cyric that Cale had seen in his vision. Mask's voice seemed to sound in his head: Root out the evil.

"Dark and empty," he softly swore.

Then he remembered Riven. He tightened his grip on the dagger and looked to the Zhent assassin.

Riven stood staring up at Marden the way a wolf looks at a wayward lamb. Cale saw Marden's death in Riven's stare.

The assassin must have felt the weight of Cale's gaze, for he turned from Marden and fixed his eye on Cale.

Cale held his gaze for a moment, then looked back up at Marden. Riven followed Cale's eyes, looked back him. When they made eye contact again, realization lit Riven's face. He knew. And smiled.

Cale and Riven had determined to kill the same man. What were the odds of that? Cale did not believe in coincidences.

In handcant, he signaled to Riven, The west hall. Riven pondered for a moment, signaled acquiescence.

"Enjoy the rest of your meal, gentlemen," said the Hulorn, and backed away from the balcony with Marden.

Once again conversation erupted throughout the hall. Through the surprise and anger, all of the Old Chauncel began to calculate their next move, determining how to turn this unforeseen change in Selgaunt's political waters to the advantage of their house. Unlike Cale, they did not realize that Marden was already dead.

Cale stuffed the dagger under his tunic and walked to Thamalon's table. The conversation at the table was heated. Cale waited for Thamalon to acknowledge him. When he did, Cale stepped forward. The table fell silent. Cale had expected as much.

From a pocket in his doublet, he removed a walnut pipe and small pouch filled with Sembian leaf.

"My lord. Your after-dinner pipe."

Thamalon, who normally did not smoke, did not hesitate for a moment. "Thank you, Erevis. Light it please."

Cale took his time in tamping the pipe. While he did so, the conversation at the table renewed. They had probably forgotten his presence already.

Cale lit the pipe from a candle at the table, careful to keep the candlewax out of the bowl. He presented it to Thamalon. "My lord."

"Thank you, Erevis." He took a pull on the pipe.

"There are many new faces here, my lord."

Thamalon took the point and nodded -- Cale had never seen Marden before.

"Aye," his lord responded. "Perhaps I should get to know some of them better?"

Cale took the point as well. Thamalon was asking Cale to use his contacts to learn all he could of Marden.

"Indeed, lord," Cale acknowledged, "if there is need. But strangers come and go."

Thamalon raised his eyes at that. Perhaps he understood, perhaps he did not.

Cale nodded and excused himself from the table. He had to meet Riven.

He found the Zhent assassin in a quiet side hall off of the main reception area. Both men kept their hands visible.

"Cale."

"Riven."

They stood about two paces apart, alert and ready. Cale did not waste time.

"I told you I'd kill you the next time I saw you." He spoke without fear, but put his odds at no better than one in two.

Riven sneered.

Cale glared at him. Riven glared back. They stood like that for an eternity. Riven broke the silence.

"To be precise Cale, you told me you'd try to kill me if you found me with a Zhent badge. You haven't. I'm out, through with the Network."

Cale tried to keep the surprise out of his face. Riven could be lying, but why would he?

Riven continued, "But you don't have to let that stop you."

Cale ignored the challenge. "Why'd you leave?"

Riven smirked. "A difference of opinion."

Cale digested that. He'd get no more, and they still had today's business to address.

"Out or not, I know what you're here to do."

Riven gave a brief nod of acknowledgement. "And I know that you want to do the same. So?"

"Who are you working for?"

Riven's eye narrowed. "Me. Our boy's got something I want."

Cale was surprised to have gotten that much of an answer. He decided to push further. "And what is that?"

Riven ignored the question and asked one of his own. "What makes you willing to dirty your hands, Cale?"

Cale decided to be open, in the interest of eliciting more information. "He's got something I want, too."

Riven shifted on his feet. "Seems we've got a problem then."

Cale readied himself too. "Seems we do."

Hands went to daggers.

An idea formed in Cale's mind. If Mask was at work here, then surely he had brought the two of them together for a reason. "We can do it this way. Or another way."

Riven eyed him warily. "How else can it go, Cale, between you and me?"

Cale decided to roll the bones. "He's got an ivory rod. That's what I'm after." Cale did not bother telling Riven that Marden was also a Cyricist whose presence in high office threatened the city. Riven would not care.

The assassin let his own blade drop a handwidth. He considered for a moment, then said, "He's also got a black staff. That's mine."

Cale nodded. "Done then?"

"Done."

Riven sheathed his blade. Cale did the same.

Riven's stepped forward and spoke in a whisper. "I'll trail him for a few days, learn his pattern. I'll let you know the when and where."

Cale found the thought of working with Riven distasteful, but saw no other way. Besides, he had worked with worse. "This operation is just you and me, Riven. No one else. I see anyone else, even think that I see anyone else, and I walk. Then I'll find you and kill you."

Riven smiled through his goatee. "I'd expect nothing less."

They backed away from each other and went their separate ways. At least for now.



Word came from Riven five days later, in the form of a letter written by a scribe-for-hire. Cale wondered if Riven knew how to read and write. The Stag. Tonight, two hours after dusk. Come prepared.

That night, after completing his duties supervising the house staff, Cale prayed to Mask for spells, loaded his gear into a leather rucksack, and excused himself from the manse on personal business. His lord, consistent with past practice, did not press Cale for details. No one else dared question him at all.

When he got out of eyeshot of Stormweather, he ducked into a side alley off Sarn Street, opened the rucksack, and strapped on his gear -- his blades, leather armor, cloak, and soft boots. He took a deep breath of the cool spring air and headed for the Black Stag.

It took a few seconds for Cale's vision to adjust to the dim, smoky interior of the Stag. The sour stink of old vomit and the greasy smell of fish oil filled his nostrils. The Stag's few patrons eyed him darkly as he crossed the wood planked floor. Riven, he saw, sat in a corner near the bar, dressed in his signature crimson cloak. Cale walked to the bar and laid a silver raven on the stained wood.

"One."

The scrawny bartender drew an ale from the barrel behind the bar and pushed Cale the tankard. Cale took a long draw of the watery swill, then walked to Riven's table.

The assassin took in Cale's weapons and gave him a nod. "Cale."

Cale returned the nod and took a seat. The hilts of Riven's sabers were visible through his cloak. On the bench beside him sat two crossbows.

Riven noticed him eyeing the crossbows. "You know how to use one of those?"

"Of course." A good assassin knew how to use most every weapon. And Cale was . . . had been, a good assassin.

"Good. We'll need them tonight."

Cale took another draw on his ale. He did not like the adrenal rush he felt when he thought about the hit. It reminded him too much of old times, times he wanted to leave in the past.

Riven took a pull on his ale.

"What's the location?" Cale asked.

"Jespar Lane. In the warehouse district. On the way to the whores. Seems our Marden's got a weakness for women.

Cale knew the place. A narrow street, with tall buildings on every side. Buildings that would be mostly unoccupied at night.

"How many?"

Riven grinned. "A carriage. Probably five, six guards."

"A doable mark," Cale said.

"Quite," agreed Riven, and finished his ale. "We should get in position. Grab a crossbow."

Cale and Riven crouched in the shadows under the eaves of a closed cooper's shop. The widely spaced lamps of Jespar Lane left the narrow thoroughfare dark. No one was in sight. Riven withdrew a hood and black mask -- not unlike the one Cale carried as a holy symbol -- from his belt pouch.

"Here." He held out the hooded mask to Cale.

"Brought my own," replied Cale. He wanted to ask Riven where he had gotten the black mask, but wasn't sure he'd like the answer.

The masks were a necessary precaution. No one could be allowed to see their faces. Putting down the Proxy, for whatever reason, amounted to a political assassination. There would be an extensive investigation afterwards, including the use of divination magic. Under the spells of a powerful priest, even the dead could be compelled to describe what had happened to them, who had happened to them. The hit had to go flawlessly.

Cale felt the strange calmness that always came over him when he was on a job. Just like the old days. But unlike the old days, he heard a little voice within him telling him that he was about to commit murder. The welfare of the city is at stake, he reminded himself, and Marden is a Cyricist. Some part of him recognized the weakness of the rationalization, but he held on to it tighter than a dwarven miser held his coppers.

Riven looked up the empty street. "It will be a black carriage. Team of two horses plus the guards."

Cale nodded. He knew what the palace carriages looked like. He also knew they'd need to stop the carriage. Without some kind of roadblock, that would be difficult. Unless . . .

"Did you buy the driver?"

Riven grinned. "Yeah. Expensive bastard. He'll rein the horses when he reaches that streetlamp." He pointed at the streetlamp nearest them, maybe a dagger toss away. "That's when we go."

Cale imagined the target, imagined the rearing horses, rehearsed the hit in his mind. He looked Riven in the face. "Does the driver walk?"

Riven sniffed, sighted along his crossbow at his own imaginary target. "Of course not."

The old Cale would have agreed, would have left no potential witnesses. The new Cale did not. "Does he know who you are?"

Riven looked at him as though he were a child. "Of course he doesn't know who I am. What are you thinking?"

Cale would not shed any more blood than absolutely necessary. "Then he's no danger to us. He walks." He dared Riven with his eyes to contradict him.

Riven didn't. After a moment, he smiled. "You must be getting soft, Cale. All that easy living." His smile turned to a sneer. "But I'll indulge you. This time. He walks. The Watch'll track him down and kill him anyway."

They sat in silence for a time. Cale readied his crossbow and bolts, then laid his blades beside him. Riven did the same. They took a knee behind the cooper's barrels.

"How long?" Cale asked.

"Not long now," replied Riven, and pulled on his mask.

Cale pulled on his holy symbol: a black velvet mask that hid only half his face. This was the first time he had ever actually worn the mask. It felt like . . . like it had always been there. He knew he and Riven must look much the same.

"He'll have the staff and rod?" Cale asked.

"I don't know."

Cale cursed.

Riven spoke in a whisper. "If he doesn't have them, we'll convince him to tell us where they are. Well enough?"

Cale nodded, though he knew what Riven meant by convince. "Well enough."

Within a quarter hour, both of them heard a carriage approaching.

"Ready," Riven said, and readied his crossbow.

Cale silently rehearsed the words to a spell in his mind. His crossbow and blades lay on the ground beside him. "Ready. I'll silence the area around the carriage. They won't be able to make a sound, and they won't hear us."

Riven looked at him sidelong, obviously uncomfortable with spellcasting. "Fine. We need to be clear in less than a hundred count, so don't waste all your time with spells."

The carriage came into view.

Two guards sat on the driver's bench, flanking the uniformed driver. Cocked crossbows rested on their knees. Two more rode on the back rail, similarly armed. The additional guards must have been within the carriage.

The horses pulled at an easy canter, the clapping of their hooves on the pavement loud in the otherwise silent night. Cale took in the guards' demeanor: They looked alert but relaxed.

The carriage drew closer. When it got within a quarter of a block of the signal streetlamp, Cale recited the words to his prayer in a whisper. The incantation forcefully reminded him that Mask had started this whole process; Mask had pulled Riven in; Mask wanted Cale to become an assassin again.

In for a dram, in for a drink, he thought. He finished the spell and grabbed the crossbow.

The field of magical silence took effect a moment before the wagon reached the streetlamp. The clapping of the horses fell silent. In nearly the same instant, the driver jerked hard on the reins. The horses reared up, neighing silently.

The twang of Riven's crossbow sounded beside Cale. The guard to the left of the driver fell dead, a bolt through his face.

"I've got the rear," Riven said, calm as a windless sea. He stood, slung his crossbow, drew his magical sabres and ran for the carriage.

Cale shot the second guard on the driver's bench through the throat as he tried to leap down to the road. The man tumbled face down to the cobbles, leaking crimson. Cale slung his crossbow, grabbed his blades and rushed the carriage, only a few steps behind Riven.

The guards at the rear of the carriage, though confused by the silence, saw them coming. They hopped off to the road, drew their blades, and waited for Riven.

Still outside the globe of silence, Cale stopped and hurriedly incanted another prayer, this one to hold immobile the target of his spell. Mentally, he chose one of the guards. The man went rigid.

Riven closed on the other guard. Within the silence, the combat made no sound. Riven's sabres were a blur. The guard parried the assassin's initial thrust, spun and tried a reverse slash to Riven's throat. The assassin ducked below the guard's slash, and at the same time sliced his sabre across the guard's knee. The man collapsed, grimacing. Riven stabbed him through the chest with his other sabre.

Before Riven could sprint for the carriage door, Cale called upon Mask again. A globe of darkness took shape around the carriage. Within, the Proxy and his guards would now be unable to hear or see.

Riven skidded to a halt before running into the darkness. He looked back to Cale.

Cale signaled in handcant. My doing. I drop the darkness. You're on the door. Crossbows first, then cleanup.

Riven nodded and both unslung their crossbows. As he loaded, Riven's eyes went to the guard held immobile near the rear of the carriage. He raised his eyebrows in a question.

Cale signaled sharply. He walks too.

Riven smiled darkly while he cocked his crossbow.

When they had loaded, Cale took aim at where he believed the carriage door to be. Riven did the same.

Cale mentally dispelled the globe of darkness.

The carriage door flew open and two guards burst out, blades bare. Bolts flew and both guards fell, shot through the chest.

Marden leaped out behind them and jumped to the street. In his left hand, he held a thin stick of iron tipped with silver; in his right, another thin stick, this one tipped with a sapphire.

Wands, Cale realized. Marden was wizard! Dark and empty! He tried to shout a warning, but the silence ate the sound. Riven must have realized the danger, however, for he dove to his right just as a bolt of lightning exploded from the sapphire tipped wand. The jagged bolt cut a path through the air, caught Riven in mid-dive and spun him full around. The stink of burned flesh filled the street. Cale bared his blade and rushed Marden, but before he had taken two strides, four glowing missiles shot from the other wand and burned their way into Cale's chest. The impact stopped Cale's charge cold. Marden turned and ran away up the street, his mouth contorted with the effort to yell for help. If he got outside the area of the silence spell . . .

His clothes still smoking, Riven regained his feet and pounced like a cat. Cale was right behind him. They caught the slow wizard in only a few strides. Both jumped on his back and rode him to the ground before he could bring his wands to bear. Riven's sabre cut both wands from Marden's hand. Fingers and blood spilled to the earth. Marden screamed silently. Riven shoved his face into the dirt of the street. Cale gathered the wands and pocketed them. He and Riven could distribute them later.

A few punches from Riven ended the wizard's struggling and they turned him over. The Proxy stared with wide eyes. His mouth was racing. Cale held a finger to his lips to tell him to hold his tongue. For emphasis, he showed Marden his longsword. The wizard's mouth closed.

Cale dispelled the magical silence. "Keep your mouth shut," Cale ordered. He looked to Riven. "Search him."

Riven quickly rifled the wizard's clothes. He found a medallion engraved with Cyric's symbol. The assassin spat and threw the symbol to the ground. "Nothing worth anything."

Cale held his blade to Marden's throat. "You've got an ivory staff and a black rod, Cyricist. Where are they?"

For a moment Marden looked confused, but he regathered himself. "You'll get nothing from me. The Dark Sun protects his own. You'll pay for this --"

Cale punched him the mouth and teeth fell to the road. The wizard groaned and his eyes rolled back in his head, but still he shook his head "no."

Riven circled behind him and grabbed him by his hair to expose his throat. His sabre threatened the jugular. He spoke in a hiss. Cale knew the tone. Marden's life hung by a thread.

"We'll ask once more. Only once. You can tell us what we want to know or I can drag you into that abandoned building there," he nodded at a darkened warehouse, "and inflict pain for hours. With another silence spell, no one will hear. I'll count to three." He paused to let that sink in.

Cale saw the battle on Marden's face -- stay true to his faith and die ugly, or turn his back on his god and live.

"One."

Marden began to shake. "No. You won't do it. The Watch will come. I'm the Proxy."

"Two."

"All right, godsdammit!" shouted Marden. "All right." Cale saw the surrender in his eyes.

"Jurid Gauston has what you want."

Cale noticed Riven stiffen at the name. "Who is Gauston?" Cale asked Marden.

"A priest. Of Cyric."

Cale saw it now. This Gauston was the true servant of Cyric. Marden was nothing more than a lackey. "Gauston enspelled the Hulorn? Forced him to appoint you?"

Marden said nothing, but his eyes told Cale the truth of it.

"Where is he?"

Marden hesitated. Riven slashed his ribs. The wizard squealed like a pig.

"Where?"

Marden collapsed in on himself. "Hevranin Street. In the rooms over Nestor's tool shop."

"Alone?"

The wizard nodded. "Usually."

Cale believed him. To judge from Riven's nod, so did he. Riven's gaze stayed with Cale and asked the unspoken question. What to do with Marden?

"Leave him," Cale said. This Marden was no threat to the city. He was a coward, an opportunist who served Cyric to bring himself power. Once Cale and Riven eliminated Gauston, the real threat, Marden would be discovered and dealt with. Cale wanted no more blood on his hands than necessary. Mask might want to remake him into an assassin, but he wouldn't be an indiscriminate killer.

To Cale's surprise, Riven did not argue. He pulled Marden close and said, "If you warn him, if I even think that you've warned him, I'll come back for you and keep my promise. You know you're vulnerable now. Think about that before you open your mouth."

Riven punched the wizard in the jaw and Marden collapsed with a groan, unconscious. Riven found the driver he had bought and wounded him across the chest to make it look believable -- all out of eye and earshot of the immobile guard -- then he and Cale removed their masks and went on their way.

"You know this Gauston?" Cale asked as they hurried uptown.

Riven nodded. "He's a former Zhent. Things have been . . . uncomfortable for Cyricists since the Banites retook the organization. I heard he was dead."

Cale had heard only a little about the internecine war within the Zhents between the Cyricists and Banites. The Cyricists were losing. Gauston probably had not had it easy over the past months. It would be even less easy tonight.

Riven went on. "I know the location too. An old Zhent hole. The Network stopped using it years ago. This prick's nothing. Just a rat hiding in an old hole. No friends. No protection. An easy takedown."

An easy takedown. It should have made Cale feel relieved. Instead it made him feel . . . heavy. Root out the evil, he reminded himself, parroting Mask. This Gauston was a threat to the city, and a priest of the Dark Sun.

Before they got into this any further, Cale had to know Riven's true motivation. He stopped and grabbed Riven by the shoulder. "Why are you doing this, Riven? Just to get a staff?"

Riven hesitated a moment too long. "Little late for that question, isn't it? But yes. The staff."

Cale knew he was lying. Mask was pulling the assassin's strings, same as Cale. Had the Shadowlord Called Riven too?

"You are doing it for a rod, Cale. What's the difference?"

The difference was that Cale thought he was doing a good -- for himself and the city. To Riven, he said, "None. No difference."

Riven pulled free of Cale's grasp. "Then let's get on with it."

Cale let it go. He knew what he needed to know.

They went the rest of the way in silence, keeping to the alleys and avoiding Selgaunt's nighttime street traffic. When they reached the tool shop, they blended into the darkness of an alley across the street and observed for a time. Cale saw nothing: no guards, no precautions of any kind. This priest of Cyric was either very confident or very stupid.

The lower floor of the tool shop stood dark, its door locked, its windows shuttered. Lantern light leaked through the closed shutters of the upper floor windows. An exterior stairway built along the side of the building provided independent ingress and egress to the upper floor.

"Stairs and door are probably protected with spells, at least," Riven said softly.

Cale nodded. He did not mention that he could detect and dispel any such spells. No need to tip Riven to any more of his abilities than necessary.

"The window on the side then," Cale said.

"Agreed."

Cale darted across the street. Riven followed. They circled the building and silently scaled the side wall until they reached the window.

Cale put his ear to the shutter slats. The crackle of a fire, nothing more. He signaled Riven for silence, maintained his position on the wall, and withdrew a thin-bladed knife from his belt. He slid the blade between the shutters and silently lifted the latch. To Riven, he signaled, Done. Ready in three.

He counted three, pulled the large shutters open, and pulled himself into the room. Riven followed. Nothing but a plain desk table, and two large, high-backed chairs facing the stone hearth. Two men could have been seated in each of those chairs and Cale would not have been able to see them. Cale signaled Riven and they advanced on the chairs, blades drawn.

A thin, middle-aged old man unfolded himself from the lefthand chair and turned to face them. "I wondered when you would arrive." He wore purple robes, and a silver symbol of Cyric hung from a long chain about his neck -- Gauston. Deep circles painted the skin below his eyes, and his face was drawn. Two days growth of gray beard peppered his cheeks.

Cale's eyes went to Gauston's hand, where he held a staff . . . or a rod . . . composed of two intricately entwined tree limbs, each as thick as a man's thumb -- one of white birch, the other of black ebony, and so twisted up in each other so as to be inseparable. A skull capped the staff. Cale was sure the lipless teeth of the skull were grinning.

Cale looked to Riven; Riven looked to him. Cale's rod and Riven's staff were one and the same, and only one of them could leave with it. Mask had engineered a duel.

"Afterward?" Cale asked.

"Afterward," agreed Riven.

Without another word, Riven bounded across the room. Gauston raised the staff and softly stated, "Stop where you are."

Riven froze in mid-stride.

"Slash your left arm with the blade in your right hand. Deeply."

To Cale's astonishment, Riven did exactly that. The assassin grunted in pain as he opened his forearm. Crimson spilled from the slit.

Gauston eyed Cale and indicated the staff. "You came for this, did you not?" He laughed, a hacking, staccato sound.

Cale took a step forward, his blade held loosely at his side. Gauston did not look concerned.

Cale's mind raced. He talked to buy time. "How did you know we were coming?"

Gauston walked around the big chair and took a step toward Cale. "How did I know?" He eyed Cale with hooded eyes. "Because Cyric has seen fit to show me, though he shows me nothing else."

Cale did not understand. He took another half-step toward Gauston.

Gauston eyed him up and down. "You're a priest, aren't you?" His voice was almost sad.

Cale had never been asked that question directly, and he stuttered with the answer. "Yes," he said finally. What was going on here?

Gauston's eyes found the floor. "As was I, once."

Cale coiled to attack but Gauston looked up sharply.

"But I am no longer. Now my god grants me no spells. I have only this." He brandished the staff. "And you would take even that from me, wouldn't you, priest?"

Cale saw no point in lying. "I would," he said, and eased forward another half-step.

At Cale's directness, Gauston smiled. His eyes grew thoughtful.

Cale launched himself across the room, hit Gauston full in the chest, slammed him up against the wall, and drove him to the floor. Gauston's breath went out with a whoosh. Cale jerked the staff from his grasp, then put a knee on his chest and a blade at his throat.

To Cale's surprise, Gauston did not even struggle. His eyes had the resigned look of the condemned. "Do it."

Cale raised his blade. That was why he had come, but. . . .

"Why?"

Gauston's eyes swelled with angry tears. "You're a priest! You know why!"

Cale shook his head. He didn't know.

"Because I betrayed my faith!" Gauston railed. "When the Banites," he fairly spat the word, "took back the Zhents, I renounced Cyric rather than face the sword." He looked to the ceiling, despair in his eyes. "But never in my heart, Dark Sun! Never in my heart." He returned his gaze to Cale. "Since then, he has seen fit to fill my dreams with images of you. You are to be my penance, priest. Now . . . do what you came for!"

Cale saw it all now, and it made him want to puke. Abandoned by his god, this fool Gauston wanted to die. Fine. But Mask had seen fit to oblige Gauston while at the same time manipulating Cale and Riven into retrieving the same item, thereby forcing a confrontation between them that would leave one of them dead.

"Who do you serve?" asked Gauston, intently. "Which god?"

"Mask," Cale replied, without thinking.

Gauston grinned. "Yes, yes, of course. Then you must kill me."

Cale looked down at him, a man desperate to die. Mask obviously wanted Cale to leave two corpses behind in this room. Cale decided abruptly that he would leave none.

Gauston must have sensed Cale's change of heart. "I am a servant of the Dark Sun, the enemy of your god." He squirmed, tried to grab the staff, tried to break free. Cale maintained his hold.

"Do it, priest! Do it! Who do you serve? Who?"

Cale stared down at him and thought: I serve myself.

He reversed his longsword and slammed the hilt against Gauston's temple. The old man groaned and went limp.

Cale rose. Behind him, Riven remained immobile, held fast by the staff. Cale had to admit that the staff tempted him. The power it offered was considerable. But he would not take it like this.

He walked over to Riven, blade bare, and held the staff before his eyes.

"You see what's happened? We've both been nothing more than playthings of Mask. He wanted you and I to kill that wretch then fight each other. The stronger would remain his servant." He let that sink in. "I could claim the staff and kill you now -- remember that later -- but I won't."

Cale sheathed his blade, walked to the hearth, and tossed the staff into the flames.

He walked back to Riven. "I know he's Called you. He must have. You better think well about whether you want to answer."

Riven's arm was still bleeding badly. Cale thought about it, then pulled out his velvet mask. Here was the test. If he still had Mask's favor, he still could heal. If not . . .

Then not, he said to himself.

He recited the prayer and willed the assassin's wounds to heal. Energy poured through him and into Riven. The slash closed and the bleeding stopped. For now at least, Mask seemed to respect his independence.

Cale glanced back at the hearth. The fire had nearly consumed the staff. "When that's burned up," he said to Riven, "the magic holding you will end. I'm not waiting."

With that, Cale climbed out the window. When he hit the street, he silently vowed never to lose himself in his faith the way Gauston had. A man had to remain himself, even if he was a priest.

My belief is on my terms, he thought to Mask. Take it or leave it.

As usual, Mask said nothing and gave him no sign.

Before he had gotten a block, Riven's voice sounded from back up the street. "Cale!"

Cale stopped and turned. Riven stood in the open window of Gauston's flat. "Maybe he didn't bring us together to fight, Cale. Maybe he just wanted to bring us together. Think about it. We worked well together."

Too well, Cale thought, but said nothing. He walked away and headed for the Stormweather Towers. He hoped that his bed would hold no dreams tonight.