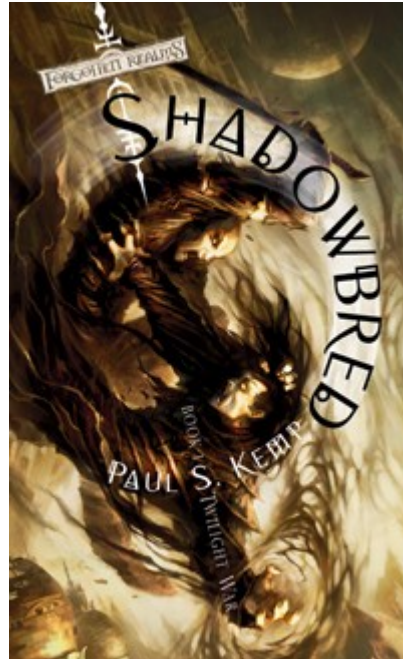


Shadowbred: Excerpt One

By Paul S. Kemp



Magadon's heart began to thump. For a moment, he feared that he had fallen asleep, that Grathan's words had been a dream, that the walls he had built in his mind had crumbled and that he would soon hear his father, see the men around the fire burst into flame. His hands started to tremble but he steeled himself, told himself that it was no dream.

He took up his bow, rose to his feet, and with difficulty, nocked an arrow. The familiar movement steadied him. He turned in a circle and looked out on the plain but saw nothing to alarm him--just rolling grass, the old oak, and few other scattered trees. He stepped around the fire and nudged Tark, who was sleeping.

"Up," he ordered. "And the rest. Be quick and quiet. Something comes."

Tark did not move. Neither did anyone else.

"Up!" Magadon said, and kned him hard.

Tark fell off his barrel, but neither he nor any of the other caravaneers around the fire stirred.

Magadon cursed. Tark and the other men had been enspelled. He weighed whether to raise the alarm and tip off the attackers that he knew of their presence. He decided there was no other way.

"Is anyone awake?!" he shouted at the wagons. "Grathan!"

His shouts agitated the pack animals further, but no one in the caravan answered his call.

He was alone. Perhaps his mental abilities had spared him the effect of whatever spell had rendered the rest of the men unconscious. He licked his lips, swallowed, and focused his mind on his arrow tip, charging it with mental energy. Power filled it and it shone red. It would pierce plate armor.

Magadon scoured the terrain with his eyes. He controlled his breathing, steadied his hands, and held his calm. He drew on his mental power, transformed energy into a physical force, and surrounded himself in a translucent barrier that would deflect incoming projectiles. Wrapped in the power of his own mind, he turned a slow circle and sought a target.

"Father?" he shouted, nervous as the word left his mouth. "Show yourself!"

A sound like rushing wind filled his ears, though there was no wind. He scanned the night for the source but saw nothing. The sound grew, louder, louder, until--

At the limits of his darkvision, a mass of squirming tendrils seeped into view. As thick around as the oak, as black as ink, they wormed sickeningly over the terrain. Their motion reminded him of the kraken's tentacles, of the grotesque limbs of the darkweaver that he had faced on the Plane of Shadows.

The tentacles brought a fog of darkness in their wake.

Two pinpoint pairs of light formed in the darkness above the tentacles, one pair the cold gray of old iron, the other pair a dull gold.

Eyes.

The rushing sound grew still louder, as loud as a cyclone. Magadon thought his eardrums would burst. The horses and mules panicked. Two snapped their lines and sped off into the night.

"Who are you?" Magadon shouted, his voice barely audible over the roar.

The tendrils drew closer; so did the eyes.

"Show yourselves!"

No response, so Magadon loosed an arrow at one pair of eyes. The missile streaked from his bow, leaving a red trail of energy in its wake. When it hit the darkness, it vanished with no visible effect.

Screaming, Magadon fired another arrow, another. The rushing sound ate his battle cries; the darkness ate his arrows.

The rush reached a crescendo, so loud Magadon felt his head would explode. How could the caravaneers sleep through it? It was like a pair of knives driven into his eardrums. He dropped his bow and clamped his hands over his ears. He screamed in pain but the roar swallowed the sound.

Without warning, the roar ceased.

But for his gasps, silence ruled the night.

Magadon's ears rang; his temples throbbed. He looked up and saw that the tendrils were gone, the eyes were gone. He was alone. He looked at his palms to see if there was any blood, saw none.

He almost collapsed with relief.

"Tark," he nudged the young merchant. "Tark!"

Still no response.

A rustle from above drew his gaze. He looked up and what he saw stole both strength and breath. His hands fell to his sides.

"Gods," he mouthed.

The night took him.