

*It's hard to get into the Night Masks. It's impossible to get out.*

### **Another Name for Dawn** By Paul S. Kemp

The garbage-strewn alley behind the Black Eye stank of puke and rotting fish. Vasen wrinkled his nose, endured the odor, and stared holes into the Eye's backdoor. It was nearly four hours past midnight. Jeldis would be coming through in moments. The target, Nomen Thorsar, soon thereafter.

At ease in the darkness, Vasen settled deeper into the shadows beside the inn's back exit. Selûne rode full and bright in the night sky above but the tall wooden buildings that lined the alley blotted out her light. Here, only a soft silver glow reached down to caress the street. Vasen waited, tense. Long seconds passed. With the waters of the Inner Harbor only a dagger toss behind him, he could hear the waves of the Sea of Fallen Stars lapping against Westgate's piers. The sound lulled him to lethargy.

To keep himself occupied, he ran through his Dwarven language lesson from the day before. Vasen enjoyed both the linguistics lessons and the after-session talks with Theevis, his teacher. Everything else that involved the Night Masks was drudgery to him. Though the Faceless, the Mask's guildmaster, had culled him from an orphanage and trained him up as an assassin and translator, Vasen knew that the guild would discard him whenever it became convenient. He owed them no gratitude, and now he wanted out. To get out he needed coin, and he knew how to earn money only through extortion, bribery, and assassination. The logic was inexorable and ironic. To get out, he needed to get deeper in. From behind the inn's door, the loud crash of a broken dish gave him a start. He rebuked himself for his inattention and refocused on the job. He could not afford to be sloppy.

The murmur of voices carried through the inn's oak walls. An occasional shout or laugh rose above the general din. The place sounded crowded.

*Good*, he thought. He and his crew had chosen The Eye for two reasons; Nomen Thorsar regularly slumped here, and none of the crew had ever set foot in the place. Their faces would not be remembered, and they would never be back. The door flew open. Candlelight, voices, and the smell of beef stew spilled into the alley. Out of professional habit, Vasen closed one eye to avoid entirely losing his night-adjusted vision. A tall figure stood momentarily silhouetted in the doorway before pushing it closed. Jeldis.

The big man walked past without slowing. Above the stink of the alley, Vasen caught a whiff of his smell: oiled leather and stale ale. His ringmail armor clinked as he moved. He wore a longsword at his belt.

"Nomen, drunk with one bodyguard," Jeldis said. "Less than a twenty count behind me."

"Got it," Vasen acknowledged. He and his team had trailed Nomen Thorsar for the previous two tendays. They had learned that when slumming, the nobleman always entered and exited via back doors. Things were going according to plan.

“Don’t foul this up,” Jeldis hissed over his shoulder.

“Piss off.”

Jeldis offered no retort, merely stalked down the alley and out of sight. Vasen watched him go, imagining how satisfying it would be to bury a dagger in his spine, then turned back to business.

He drew a dagger, his tool for close work. The metal of the hilt felt cool in his hand. His heart rate accelerated slightly – but only slightly. He brushed the red hair from his face and waited.

Within a few moments voices sounded from behind the door. Vasen could not make out the words, but he knew it had to be Nomen and the bodyguard. The door opened.

Nomen staggered through first, stumbled, and slipped to the ground.

“Blast,” he cursed, his voice slurred with drink.

Behind him, the bodyguard filled the doorway. A hulking brute, the dark-haired bastard fairly glittered with steel: a chainmail shirt, two daggers, and a broadsword. Vasen figured him to be new to the job. An experienced man would never have let his charge walk through the door first. If Vasen had wanted to kill Nomen, he could have done it before the bodyguard ever got out of the doorway.

“Don’t just stand there, lout,” said Nomen. “Help me up.”

The big man murmured something unintelligible, looked once up and down the alley – his eyes looked over and past Vasen – closed the inn door, and stalked forward to help Nomen regain his feet.

The moment the bodyguard exposed his back, Vasen erupted from the shadows. The big man never saw it coming. Vasen drove his dagger into the man’s neck just under the base of the skull. Death came instantly. Vasen jerked the dagger free, shouldered the corpse to the ground, and stood over Nomen.

The brown haired young nobleman stared at him with eyes as wide as coins. His mouth hung open. He seemed to want to say something, but nothing came forth save a frightened croak.

Without a word, Vasen slammed the hilt of his dagger into the noblemen’s temple. He went out with a soft groan.

Moving quickly, he dragged the bodyguard’s corpse into the darkness further down the alley. Afterward, he bound and gagged Nomen. He’d have to carry the pudgy nobleman across town to the drop by himself. Vasen had told his team that the client wanted to deal with him alone – a lie. He’d told them too that the job paid two hundred and fifty platinum – another lie. It paid three hundred. He planned to skim fifty off the top, just as he did with every job. Soon he would have enough coin stashed away to buy him passage and a comfortable life somewhere else. He would only miss Theevis when he left.

He gripped Thorsar by the cloak and heaved the unconscious nobleman over his shoulder. He would take the back alleys to avoid prying eyes. This job would go off like every other – without a problem.

Though it took longer than he had anticipated, the drop went fine. Deposit one nobleman; collect one bag of coins. Vasen didn’t know the names of the people who had paid, and he didn’t want to know. Now heavier by three

hundred platinum pieces, he stalked through Westgate's alleys. He would make a fifty platinum piece detour to his private apartment in the River Quarter, then go to the rendezvous at the flat. He'd be even more late, but there was nothing for it.

After clearing the alleys, he walked south down Trayben Street. Light spells cast on glass globes lined the flagged avenue and lit his way. Though Westgate's shops were all closed, the noise from the city's many taverns and eateries still gave the streets in this part of town a lively buzz. Westgate never slept, not even in the small hours before dawn.

With the bag of coins surreptitiously tucked under his cloak, he made for the River Bridge. He walked across without a pause.

Immediately to his left stood The Black Boot Inn, torchlit and still loud. Vasen kept a small room around back, a room no one but himself and Hesper the Innkeep knew about. He ducked down the side street beside The Boot, hid in the shadows, and scanned the street behind. He wanted to ensure that no one had followed him. At his back, the wooden wall of the inn vibrated with the sounds of voices and clanking dishes. He focused his attention back out on Trayben street.

Several moments passed and he saw no one. The streets were empty. Reassured, he climbed a wooden fence, circled the Boot's stables – they stank of manure and old hay – and came to the small outbuilding that served as his room. A former storehouse, it had been built right off the inn's kitchens.

When he opened the door he immediately sensed the intruder, heard the soft intake of breath, felt the alien presence in the room. He froze for an instant too long. Before he could pull his longsword free a shoulder slammed into his chest and knocked him into the wall. A punch to the side of the head set off a spark shower behind his eyes. The attacker maneuvered behind him, gripped him in a chokehold, and began to squeeze.

"Sorry," the man leaned his head forward to say. A young man's voice, and a young man's mistake.

Vasen threw his own head back and slammed the crown of his skull into the bridge of the man's nose. It broke with a wet crunch. Warm blood sprayed the back of Vasen's neck. The man grunted in pain, reflexively released his hold on Vasen's throat. Vasen whirled around, swinging a wild elbow as he did. It landed flush against the man's temple. The man – the boy, Vasen corrected, for he saw that the would-be assassin was younger than he by at least three years – hit the floor flat on his stomach. Vasen grabbed a handful of hair, jerked the boy's head back, and held a dagger at his throat.

"Don't," the boy said through clenched teeth. "Please."

Vasen didn't. He wanted to know what in the Hells was going on, though he had already begun to suspect.

He released the boy's head but kept the dagger at his throat. Blood ran unabated from the assassin's nose, pooled on the floor.

"I'm listening," Vasen said. "Tell me what I want to hear."

The boy took a deep breath before he finally spat the information. "Jeldis told me to watch you, to find where you hid your stash. I saw you come in here yesterday. Thought I'd search for the coin. Didn't expect you back before dawn."

Vasen's breath caught; his limbs went numb. Jeldis knew. *Who else*

*then? Askaxen? Belifor? The Faceless?* That last sent a chill up Vasen's spine.

The boy went on. "They were going to hit you tonight. At the rendezvous. After taking a cut for Jeldis, I was supposed to bring the coin you skimmed. You know, so they could confront you with it."

Vasen's mind raced. What now? If Jeldis knew, then soon the whole guild would know. Vasen knew the Faceless didn't forgive betrayals. He would have to get out of the city – fast.

"That's everything," said the boy. "I swear it." Vasen nodded but made no reply. He stared absently at the back of the boy's head. He had killed so many men already, one more hardly seemed significant.

The boy must have sensed the danger. "Don't," he pleaded. "I've got a woman. A child."

Vasen pressed the boy's face into the pool of blood on the floorboards and raised his dagger –

He hesitated.

A woman. A child.

"What's your name?"

The boy spat blood, tried to turn his head and look up. "Cale. Losk Cale. Listen. I won't say anything –"

"Shut up." Vasen felt the boy shaking, smelled the ammonia stink of fear.

*What was one more murder?* He wondered again, but this time answered his own question. One more was one more. He figured it was time to start making changes.

"Tonight's your lucky night, Cale." He slammed his dagger hilt into the back of Cale's head. The boy grunted and went limp.

Vasen left the boy where he lay and rose. He felt a peculiar lightness. It felt good to have spared the boy. Losk Cale was the first unfinished business Vasen had ever left behind him. He hoped that he did not come to regret it.

He hurried across the room and slid aside the cheap night table that sat beside his dirty bed. Beneath it was a loose floorboard, the stash Cale had sought but not been able to find. Vasen used his dagger to pry up the plank. The hole looked like a mouth cut into the floor, a mouth that fed on skimmed coin. Its appetite was going to get Vasen killed.

He reached in and pulled everything out: another leather bag filled with platinum coins; four healing potions in steel vials; a magical necklace with explosive globes for charms. He prized this last above everything. A grateful mage had given him the necklace as a bonus for a job the crew had done a couple months back. Vasen had never worn it for fear that he would have to explain its existence to his crew. He wore it now. There would be no more explaining.

He shoved the potions and a handful of spending money into his belt pouch. Afterward, he consolidated the two bags of coins – those he had skimmed previously plus the entire take from tonight – and put them in a backpack, which he shouldered on. He did not have as much coin as he had wanted, but it would have to be enough.

If he could get out of Westgate.

He took a deep breath and headed for the door. On his way out, he bent over Cale's body, took a few platinum pieces from his belt pouch, and stuffed

them into the boy's hand.

*For the woman and the child, he thought.*

With that, Vasen walked out the door. With one hand on the hilt of his sword, he backtracked past the stables and walked out onto Trayben street. Immediately, he felt vulnerable, exposed. The light globes seemed too bright. The backpack on his shoulders weighed heavy. Struggling to stay calm, he kept an alert gaze on the street ahead, on every shadowy corner.

Already he was late for the rendezvous with Jeldis and his crew. He had no doubt they'd be looking for him. The whole guild would be looking for him.

Nervous, he pulled up the hood of his cloak and walked on. He wished now that he did not have such a conspicuous head of red hair.

It occurred to him then that he did not know where he was going. He had no clear plan.. He knew he had to get out of Westgate, but he wasn't sure how to do it. The city had only six gates. If Jeldis had alerted the rest of the guild, then the Faceless probably had men stationed at each gate already – no good. He could try to scale the city wall, but rumor had it that the walls were magically trapped. That left only one other way out – by ship. The Faceless would have men at the harbor too, but Westgate's maze of piers and ships was so big that Vasen thought he could avoid Night Mask agents and still get through. The problem would be in finding a ship that would allow him passage without questions. To find that kind of ship, he would have to make for the Outer Harbor.

A spike of land shaped like an angler's hook, Westgate's Harbor Quarter was really comprised of two separate entities. The interior of the hook, that part shielded from the sea, was the Inner Harbor. There, legitimate trade went on, and the city's Harbormaster ruled. The exterior side of the hook, that part that face open sea, was the Outer Harbor. There, rickety piers and decrepit warehouses provided the milieu for the city's black market. The Harbormaster's authority extended there only in name. Vasen would find a ship there if anywhere.

His mind made up, he picked up his pace and headed north. He tried to stay out of the light and kept a ready hand on his sword hilt.

Ahead, five men walking with a purpose rounded the corner. Vasen assessed them at a glance: four wore leather armor and carried lots of steel. Jeldis was among those. The last wore dark robes and bore no visible weapons. Likely he was a spellcaster.

Before they could spot him, Vasen darted into a side alley – and immediately realized his mistake. The alley was a dead end, and he did not have time to scale the wall. He looked about frantically. There was no cover save for a few barrels. He ducked behind the nearest and waited. Heart racing, he filled both fists with steel. He vowed that if this went bad, he'd take out at least Jeldis before he died.

Within moments, the Night Mask hit team came into view. They stopped near the mouth of the alley, no more than a dagger toss from Vasen's barrel. Vasen tried to focus his hearing above the sound of his thumping heart.

"Is he close or not?" Jeldis asked the mage tersely.

The mage shrugged. "The spell is limited in duration. He was close when I had him last."



At those words, Vasen's breath caught. The mage was a hound, a spellcaster who used divinations to locate men and treasure. Vasen did not know how the magic worked – maybe they tracked him by name, maybe by description, or maybe by some item he carried – but he did know that he was in serious trouble.

Jeldis put a threatening hand on the mage's shoulder. "Then you get him again. Cast another spell or whatever the Hells you do. We have to be the ones who find him. You understand?"

Behind his barrel, Vasen exhaled nervously. He knew now that multiple teams were tracking him. His crewmates must have told Faceless, and now the guildmaster had turned the Masks loose, hands and all. It was a good thing Vasen had not gone to the rendezvous. He'd have been taken, and he'd have died ugly.

"I'll tell you what I understand," the mage replied. "I understand that you shouldn't have kept Vasen Coriver's treachery to yourself for as long as you did. I also understand that if he gets away, you're likely to end up floating in the harbor. That about right?"

Jeldis snarled, gripped the mage by the robes and jerked him close. "That's about right. So I got nothing to lose in bleeding you out, now do I?"

The mage's arrogance vanished. "Fair point."

Jeldis grunted and let him go.

The mage straightened his robes, tried to recapture some dignity. "You want me to cast it now?"

Behind his barrel, Vasen readied himself. If the hound cast it now –

"How long's it last?" Jeldis asked.

"A quarter hour, right about."

"How many more can you cast tonight?"

"Three."

Jeldis rubbed the back of his neck and considered. "Let's get closer to the River Bridge first," he said at last. "My informant says he keeps quarters south of the river."

With that, they started to walk off. Vasen closed his eyes and tried to breathe. This was going to be tougher than he thought.

When he finally got himself back under control, he ran his hands over the alley wall. It was rough, an easy climb. From now on, he would move at street level only as necessary. If the guild wanted him, they'd have to come up to the city's roofs.

Leaping alleys and dashing across the tops of buildings, Vasen started to head for the Outer Harbor. Before he had traveled two blocks, however, he remembered Theevis. He could not leave without saying goodbye. He knew it increased his risk, but Theevis had been good to him, fatherly.

With his mind made up, Vasen turned east. Theevis lived alone in a modest brick home in the Foreign Quarter of the city. Vasen had never learned how his tutor had become beholden to the Faceless. He knew only that Theevis was a former adventurer with shadows in his past. Vasen had never wanted to know anything more. To him, Theevis was simply a teacher and a friend.

Vasen stood on the street a block away from his tutor's house. He surveyed the buildings all around, the rooftops, the alleys. He saw no one. Here, torches rather than light globes lit the street, and dancing brands cast a flickering patchwork of shadows. To the east, the sky was already beginning to lighten. He did not want to be on the streets when the sun rose. It was now or never.

Theevis's house stood dark. The old man must still be sleeping.

Vasen hurriedly crossed the street and approached the house. When he reached the door, he debated for an instant whether to pick the lock or knock.

Knock, he decided, and rapped once against the wood. The sound reverberated up and down the street. A dog barked from somewhere nearby. Nervous, Vasen raised his fist to rap again but a sleepy voice stopped him.

"Who's there?" asked Theevis.

"Vasen Coriver."

Theevis muttered something and opened the door. The old man's gray hair stuck out every which way, and he wore wrinkled white nightclothes. Bleary eyes looked out from a weathered visage. "Vasen, come in. What is it boy?"

Vasen cast one look back onto the street, entered, and closed the door behind him. The room beyond was small and sparsely furnished. Theevis went to a small hutch from which he produced two glasses of wine. Vasen declined.

"You look troubled, young man. Losing sleep over a translation?" He smiles around his goblet.

"No, aerister." Out of habit, Vasen had referred to Theevis with the elven word for teacher. "I'm in trouble, and I'm leaving the city. But I wanted to say goodbye. I want you to know that I ... appreciate what I've learned from you. Everything I've learned."

Theevis's bleary eyes grew immediately clear. He set down the wineglass. "What kind of trouble? Surely not with the guild?"

Vasen could not meet his eyes.

"Look at me, boy. Did you cross The Faceless?"

Vasen looked up, nodded.

"Gods," Theevis oathed. He sank into an armchair beside the cold fireplace. "Gods, boy. If you were foolish enough to cross the guild, then you didn't learn anything important from me."

Vasen tried to keep the hurt from his face. Theevis's reprimand hit him hard. He must have failed to hide the pain, for Theevis's tone softened.

"I'm sorry, Vasen. I didn't mean that. Look at me boy. You see where crossing the Faceless gets you? My comrades are dead and I'm alive only because I'm of service to the guild. This is no life, Vasen. Only the occasional student like you makes it bearable."

Vasen could think of nothing to say.

Theevis looked up and smiled softly, tiredly. "Ah well. Korvikoum, as the dwarves say. We all pay for the choices we make."

To that, Vasen nodded. He knew all about paying the price for his choices. "I just wanted to say goodbye, aerister. I ... I learned much here, and I'll miss you. But I have to go now. They're after me already."

Theevis looked up sharply, half rose from his chair.

“They know?”

“They know.”

“Gods, boy.” Theevis jumped out of his chair and took Vasen by the arm. “They’ll have hounds after you!”

“I know - ”

“Wait. I’ve got something that might help. Something I’ve kept for myself, just in case.” The old man hurried into a back room. He returned after a few moments with a thin stick of wood in his hand.

“A wand from my adventuring days,” he explained, holding up the stick. “Its magic will make it harder for the hounds to track you.” Without waiting for Vasen’s reply, Theevis uttered a word of magic and touched him with the wand. A charge went through Vasen’s body.

“It’s not foolproof, but it’ll help.” Theevis took him by the shoulders, looked him up and down. “Damned red hair of yours makes you stand out. Hmm. You fond of it?”

“Fond of it?” Vasen’s hand went to his red hair. He had never thought about it before; that meant, he supposed, that he wasn’t particularly fond of it. “I guess not.”

“Good. A cantrip then.” Theevis smiled, reached up to put his hands around Vasen’s head, and uttered a quick incantation. Vasen felt a flash of pain in his scalp. Before he could think why, his hair fell to the floor in a red shower.

“Blast,” he cursed. He ran a hand over his now smooth pate, a strange sensation. “Blast.”

“I’d shrink you too, if I could,” Theevis said. “Your height is conspicuous. Get used to the baldness though. It’s a good disguise. Makes you look a new man.”

Vasen looked at the hair around his feet and smiled – a new man, indeed. Inexplicably, his thoughts turned to Losk Cale, the boy he had spared earlier. A new man ...

Theevis grew serious. “You better go. I don’t want to know where you’re going, but when you get there, get yourself smart. Get out of this kind of life, you hear?”

Vasen nodded. “Goodbye.” He squeezed Theevis’s shoulder. Without warning, the old man caught him up in an embrace.

“You’ve been like a son to me, Vasen. I’ll miss you.” Theevis’s voice shook.

Before Vasen’s own eyes began to well, he nodded, turned, and walked out the door.

When he hit the street, he headed for the harbor. The night breeze danced over his bald scalp. He found the sensation enjoyable and decided to leave the hood of his cloak down.

Because he had little time, he opted against using the rooftops. Instead, he headed in a straight line for the harbor. With Theevis’s magic thwarting the Night Masks hounds, he could buy passage and hide aboard a ship until it weighed anchor.

The brick and timber shops around him were beginning to awaken. Candlelight leaked out from around closed shutters as shopkeepers prepared their wares for the upcoming day. A few were already out sweeping their front



stoops. Farmers made their way toward the market in creaky horse-drawn wagons. Vasen passed them by and said nothing. He was only minutes from the harbor.

He started to cross Borinkel's Avenue when from his right he heard a shout of, "There! That's him!" He spun to see three men racing toward him, iron bare. Behind them stood a robed figure, already in the midst of spellcasting. Theevis had warned him that the wand's magical protection was not infallible. At least one of the hounds had managed to track him.

He jerked free a dagger and hurled it at one of the charging men. It buzzed through the air and took the man straight in the gut. He grunted, doubled over, and fell to the street. Vasen turned and ran.

He hadn't taken two strides before the hound's magic affected him. His muscles grew thick and sluggish. He suddenly felt as though he were running through mud. Behind him, he could hear the stomps of his pursuers on the flagged street. They were drawing closer.

He tried to fight off the spell, willed himself to move, but his legs felt leaden. His arms would not answer his commands –

Without warning, the spell effect ended. He had resisted it!

Smiling fiercely, he exploded back into a run and sprinted down the nearest alley. The men pursued hard after. Vasen toppled every barrel he passed, sent them rolling behind him. First one, then another, then another. The men cursed, tried to leap them, failed, and fell. Breathing hard, Vasen rounded a corner, got a grip on the rough wall, and climbed for his life.

It would be only moments before his pursuers regained their feet.

He hadn't made it twenty feet before he heard them approach. He froze, tried to make himself one with the wall. Cursing and breathing hard, the men were right below him. Vasen's heart hammered in his chest. He held onto the wall with only one hand. With the other he gripped an explosive globe on his necklace, readied it for a throw.

They ran past and continued down the alley.

He sighed in relief and climbed the rest of the way to the roof. When he reached the top, he ran across the rooftop and looked back onto Borinkel's Avenue. There, in the middle of the street, the hound was kneeling over the fallen body of the man Vasen had hit with the dagger. The man was apparently dead, for the mage left him on the ground and started to move toward the alley.

Since this hound had shown himself able to see through Theevis's protective charm, Vasen decided that he could not allow him to live. Crouched low, he crept to the edge of the rood and watched the mage approach below. He knew that the other two Mask agents would not return for at least a few moments. Plenty of time.

He silently drew his longsword. The Dwarven and Elven words for killing danced through his brain – *novlik* and *eisliesen*. Both sounded cleaner than murder.

The mage drew closer. Vasen saw that this was the same one who had been part of Jeldis's team. Strange that Jeldis hadn't appeared.

The mage was just below Vasen now. He started to walk off but froze, as though he sensed something ...

It registered with Vasen then – the mage still had his detection spell in effect!

The mage looked up to the roof in alarm. His mouth moved with the beginnings of a spell. Vasen cursed and leaped from the roof with his longsword raised high to strike. Before the mage could finish his incantation, Vasen chopped downward and split the hound's skull. Blood and brains showered the street. Vasen's momentum carried him hard to the ground. He crashed to the street in a bloody tangle with the dead mage. The awkward landing snapped his ankle.

He groaned but bit his lip to prevent a scream. Eyes watering, he pulled forth a healing potion and gulped it down. Instantly, the bones of his ankle knit back together. He disengaged from the body of the mage and stood to test the ankle – still tender. He gulped a second healing potion. The pain vanished altogether. But for the corpse at his feet, it was as though the leap had never happened.

Without a backward glance, Vasen scaled back up to the rooftops and sped for the Outer Harbor.

He made it to the harbor without seeing any more Night Mask hit teams. The smell of sea salt and fish filled his nostrils. For as far as he could see to the north and south, ships sat at piers. There were Inner Sea galleys, biremes from the south, Cormyrian schooners, even a few high-prowed longboats. A forest of masts stood against the pre-dawn sky, black spires ascending skyward. Even at this hour he could hear the occasional shout carry from a ship's rigging.

Scattered groups of men walked the waterfront, some obviously sailors returning from shore leave drunk, others unidentifiable pedestrians. From atop a warehouse roof, Vasen observed for a time, tried to determine whether any were Mask agents. He couldn't tell.

With nothing else for it, he climbed over the lip of the roof and descended the warehouse wall. Once at street level, he melted into the darkness and peered up and down the wharf. He saw no pursuers, only darkness.

Across from him, a three-sailed schooner sat in its berth – as good a ship as any. Lanterns illuminated the deck. Sailors climbed among the rigging like spiders in a web, shouting, working, laughing. He looked to the masthead, but the ship flew no colors. An independent merchant then, or maybe a pirate. Either way, fine by Vasen.

He looked once more up and down the wharf, saw no one, and broke from cover. Walking quickly – he hoped unobtrusively – he made straight for the ship. A plaque affixed to the side of the prow declared the vessel's name: *Wave Runner*.

A few of the crewmen on deck watched him approach. Two left what they were doing and walked down the gangplank to meet him. Vasen kept his hands empty and visible.

The sailors wore light scrubs and soft leather shoes typical of seamen. Each sported several days' growth of beard. Their hard eyes asked Vasen his business before they ever opened their mouths.

"Help you, mate?" asked the taller. Vasen saw that he held some kind of spike or pin nestled in his palm – a weapon. The other sailor stepped out wide,

took a flanking position.

Vasen made no hostile move. He figured the men to be pirates with a sensitive cargo aboard. He did not want to appear a snooper or agent of the Harbormaster.

“I need passage. When do you sail?”

The taller sailor ignored the question, flashed a hard smile of stained teeth. “We sail at dawn, but we ain’t taking passengers.” With that, they turned and began to walk away.

“I can pay.” Vasen said, and pulled out a few platinum. That turned them round. Vasen knew it was risky to show wealth to these pirates, but he was desperate.

Both sailors’ eyes grew sly at sight of coin. “So it’s like that, is it?” The taller nudged the shorter. “He looks nervous, don’t he, Tik?”

The other smiled and nodded, his eyes glued to the coins.

“You in trouble boy?”

Vasen bit back the angry words that rose in his throat. Instead he tossed the platinum at them. Their hands flashed and not one coin hit the pier.

“There’s more for each of you, and for the captain. If I get passage.”

The coins vanished into the sailors’ scrubs. The taller one grinned. “We’ve all been in trouble sometime, though, haven’t we, Tik?”

The shorter man gave a noncommittal grunt.

“Tell you what, the captain doesn’t come aboard until the sun’s up.” He gave the short man another nudge. “That’s tradition ain’t it, Tik?”

Another grunt.

The taller looked at Vasen and again flashed those stained teeth. “You can wait here on the pier until he shows. It’s the captain’s say whether you come or not. But for the right price he’s been known to take in folks, even one’s what have trouble. Hasn’t he, Tik?”

Tik said nothing.

Vasen kept the anger from his face. There was nothing for it but to accept the offer.

“I’ll wait.”

The sailors nodded. “Suit yerself,” said the taller. Without another word, both Tall and Tik turned and walked up the gangplank.

Vasen walked a short distance away, burned that he had to endure smugness from a couple of deckhands. Any other night, and he’d have shoved that spike down both their throats. But tonight was not any other night. *Wave Runner* was his best hope.

Out of long habit, he translated the vessel’s name into Elven, Dwarven, Lurienal, then Thorass. The linguistic exercise reminded him fondly of Theevis. He smiled to himself, thought of his mentor, and waited for the captain to arrive. Dawn was less than a half-hour away. The lap of waves against the pier made him drowsy. He closed his eyes, felt his fatigue for the first time.

A harsh voice pulled him out of his reverie. Jeldis’s voice.

“You think shaving your head would hide you from me? I can recognize your walk at a spear’s cast, Coriver. And I didn’t need a hound to tell me you’d come to the harbor.”

Vasen snapped open his eyes and whipped free his blade. Jeldis stood at

the end of the pier, ten paces away, his own longsword already in hand. Vasen scanned the area but there was no one else in sight. Jeldis was alone.

The big man must have read his gaze. "Just you and me, Coriver. I sent away the rest of my team." His cold eyes promised blood. "It was my mistake to wait so long to move on you, my mistake to remedy."

Vasen considered jumping into the harbor but thought better of it. The gray water offered no escape. What would he do, swim out of Westgate? No, *Wave Runner* was his only hope. He needed to put Jeldis down now or die trying.

Resolved, he lowered into a fighting crouch. The pier did not offer as much maneuvering room as he would have liked, but it would have to do. He was just as big as Jeldis, just as strong, and a heartbeat faster. At least he hoped.

As Jeldis approached, Vasen remembered his healing potions. He pulled one of the steel vials from his belt pouch and gripped it in his offhand. Might as well have it on hand, he figured. Just in case.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the crew of *Wave Runner* had congregated near the railing, smiling, murmuring. They were going to watch the show. Vasen resolved to make it a good one.

"There's only one way out of the Masks, Coriver," Jeldis said as he slowly closed.

Vasen knew it to be true. The Faceless never let anyone escape, never stopped hunting traitors.

The sailors at *Wave Runner's* railing hollered encouragement. "Get 'em, baldy," a few said. "Yeah, kill the puke." That set off a general round of laughter.

Jeldis shot them a hateful glare and charged down the pier. He swung overhand for Vasen's head. Vasen parried, lashed out with a kick for the knee. It missed, and Jeldis danced backward.

Vasen quickly followed up with a flurry of blows. He stabbed, ducked, and slashed. The sailors murmured in appreciation but none of the blows struck home. Jeldis was too strong – and equally fast. The big man parried again and again. His longsword seemed everywhere.

Vasen knew he could not let this continue much longer. Another Mask hit team could come along. Desperate, he lunged forward, blade aimed low for Jeldis's groin. The big man swatted the sword aside, spun, and punched Vasen in the face with his free hand. Vasen's vision went blurry for a heartbeat. Reflexively, he struck out with his blade while he backed off, felt it nick flesh. *Wave Runner's* crew let out a cheer. Jeldis exclaimed in pain. Vasen tried to recover his wits.

Enraged by the wound in his forearm, Jeldis rushed forward and loosed a barrage of blows. Vasen backed off, desperately parrying. The ring of steel on steel was so fast as to sound continuous. After an eternity, Jeldis backed off. Both men stood facing each other, breathing hard.

"You'll never get away," Jeldis gasped. "If not me then someone else."

Vasen was too tired to reply, just sucked in air. His arms felt leaden. His soul too felt leaden, weighed down with hopelessness. Jeldis was right: There would always be someone else, as long as he lived.

Angrily he squeezed the vial in his hands. The vial ...

An idea took shape in his mind. He charged Jeldis with a roar. As he did, he popped the cork from the vial. Jeldis backed off, still gasping, blade held defensively. Vasen closed, swung for Jeldis's neck, missed, and left himself horribly – and deliberately – exposed.

The big man dropped to one knee and stabbed Vasen through the gut. Pain exploded in Vasen's body. Warm blood gushed from the wound and began to soak his cloak. He struggled to keep his feet, damning himself for a fool for trying such a desperate gambit.

Jeldis gave a grunt of satisfaction and jerked the blade free. The movement of the steel tore flesh and sent another wave of pain through Vasen's body. He reeled, staggered backward, felt his lifeblood pouring from his abdomen. Jeldis raised his blade high, intent on finishing the combat.

Vasen, still desperately clutching the vial, feigned a stumble, teetered on the edge of the pier, and let himself fall before Jeldis could close. As he did, he slammed the vial into his mouth – cracking a tooth in the process – and gulped. The cold water of the Harbor swallowed him.

The potion did its work instantly. The hole in his abdomen closed; the horrific pain stopped. He felt a flash of satisfaction but it vanished quickly: He had not been able to take a deep breath before submerging, and he had to stay down long enough to convince Jeldis that he was dead.

The dark water was impenetrable. Though he dropped his sword and shed his daggers, his clothes still weighed him down. Already his lungs had begun to burn.. He tried to keep a count of how long he had been under but quickly lost it.

*Leave, Jeldis, you bastard,* he willed to the surface. *Leave!*

Instinct demanded that he surface. To fight it, he instead swam downward. He found *Wave Runner's* side and swam along her barnacled keel until he reached the other side of the ship. There, he swam toward the nearest pier, still submerged. His lungs were on fire! He blew out some air, fought the urge to gulp in more, and swam. When he reached the pier, he again forced himself to stay down. Blowing out air a little at a time, he bought himself a few more seconds. Finally, he could take no more. He broke the surface and inhaled, unarmed and exposed.

A pair of legs stood on the pier over him. Vasen waited for the killing blow, but it never came.

Instead, a hairy, calloused hand appeared before his face. Vasen wiped the water from his eyes and tried to focus.

"I thought I'd be pulling a corpse from the water." The voice belonged to a grizzled middle-aged man with a black beard and bald head. His barrel-chested body had long ago gone to fat, but he still looked strong as a bull. He had only one arm, and that was extended to help Vasen from the water.

Vase took the proffered hand, and the man heaved him up easily. "Here he is, boys," the man called up to the railing of *Wave Runner*. At that, a soft cheer went up from the crew. Vasen winced at the sound, scanned the docks for Jeldis. The man read Vasen's expression and thumped him on the back.

"No need to worry, boy. That other fella sprinted off the moment you hit the water." He smiled and jerked a thumb at the ship. "I think he was worried



the boys might take matters into their own hands.”

Still gasping, Vasen only nodded and clasped the man’s shoulder gratefully.

“My mate tells me you want passage aboard *Wave Runner*. That so?”

This man was the captain then. Vasen did his best to recover his breath, “That’s so. I can pay.”

“So I hear. But you’re a hunted man, no?”

Vasen automatically translated the term: hunted in common; *vikrik* in Dwarven; *aes* in Elven; *erevis* in ancient Thorass. The drill reminded him of Theevis; sadness filled his breast. He fought down the feeling and looked the captain in the eye. After all that had happened on the pier, he could hardly deny it.

“I am.”

The Captain eyed him shrewdly, finally broke out in a grin. “That’s fine by me.”

Vasen exhaled, at last returned the captain’s smile. “Let’s get you aboard, then. We weigh anchor within the half hour.”

When the ship left, Vasen’s soul too would weigh anchor. At last, he would be free of the Masks.

“I’m Fallimor, boy. Captain Gros Fallimor. What should we call you?”

Vasen thought about it. The captain had named him a hunted man; hunted would be his name then. “Erevis,” he said. “Erevis Cale.”

The sun broke the horizon. Dawn. Already, the city was coming back to life. It was a new day.