

SOULTAKER

1 THE KNIGHTS ETERNAL



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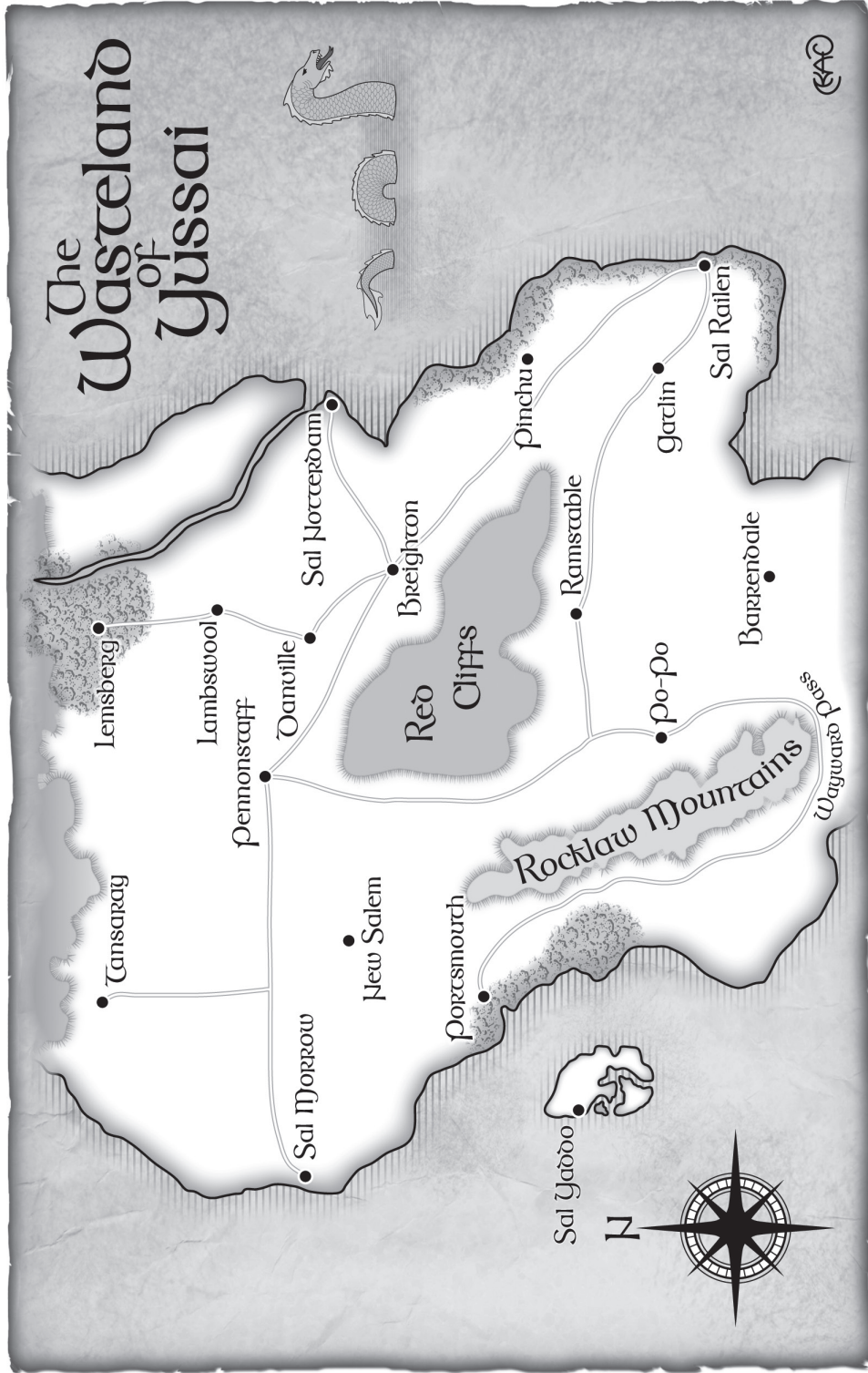
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*For struggling artists everywhere
(you know who you are)*

The Wasteland of Yussai



“Chap, would you be so kind as to tell me who I am?”

—Shadrach the 1st
18 seconds after creation

Shade kept his eyes closed while his fingers danced over the guitar strings. Sweat drenched his beard. For at least the moment, he was in heaven; music was one of the only things remaining in his life that brought him peace, that quieted his pain and regret. It didn't matter that most of the tavern's patrons weren't paying attention to the beauty he and his fellow knights created. As long as the music stemmed from him, he was sane. As long as he could concentrate on an endless succession of chords, his mind didn't linger on *her*.

A rasping tenor rose above the organized chaos of the song. Shade opened his eyes. The tavern was dim, lit by six sputtering torches affixed to the earthen walls. He glanced at his two brothers in arms, on stools beside him. Meesh slapped his palms against the skins of his bongos, his long brown hair whipping about each time he flung his head to the side. Abe had his own guitar in hand, and he expertly strummed out a rhythm with his head thrown back, beads of sweat breaking out on the creased black skin of his brow as he crooned the lyrics to a song they'd belted out a thousand times. The tune reached the chorus, and Meesh joined in with his warbling baritone. His brothers' harmony was perfect, as usual. Shade grinned.

Shouts sounded over the music, and Shade pivoted on his stool. There were less than twenty people in the tavern, and of them only three sat at the tables before the low stage to watch the performance. The rest gathered around the bar and grumbled among themselves while tossing back mugs of home-brewed liquor. This wasn't surprising. Even by Wasteland standards, Barrendale was a tiny settlement: barely four hundred people lived here, which meant Shade was more than grateful that even three of them had grown to appreciate the music. The first night they'd played here, none had paid them any mind.

Currently, a disagreement had broken out. Two large men with ratty beards shouted. One shoved the other, which brought both of them to blows. One pulled a rusty knife from his belt. The barkeep lifted an iron rod and brought it down on the bar with a *crash*. The knife-wielder sheathed his blade and the two men stopped their fighting and sat back down. The barkeep offered them each another cup, and they drank. In a matter of moments, the two were clapping each other on the back, laughing.

Shade chuckled to himself as they brought their song to its final chord. He and his mates moved onto the next one without pause.

They had been at it for nearly an hour now, and even though Shade's fingers were sore, he didn't want to stop. The barkeep, a thick man with a large gut named Burrell, offered him a nod. Shade appreciated the gesture. It wasn't all that common for proprietors in the outlying backwaters to allow them to perform, especially if they knew just who they were harboring. Even though their presence was appreciated in dire times, not everyone was hospitable to representatives of the Pentus, especially the Knights Eternal, and many nights it was difficult just to find lodging. Barrendale was in the far south of the Wasteland of Yussai, however, bordering stiff prairie grasses, beyond which lay the incessant storms of the Unknown Lands. Even brigands and demons tended to avoid such inhospitable places. In fact, the populace was so cut off from what went on in the rest of the Wasteland that they had welcomed the Knights Eternal with open arms. Shade wondered if he and his brothers had interpreted the Oracle's instructions correctly.

Abe thrummed an intentionally dissonant chord. As if on cue, five new men entered the tavern.

Shade stared at them across the span of empty tables. Each of the five newcomers stood in front of the swinging tavern door, unnoticed by the rest of the patrons. They wore rags covered with coppery dust. Their skin was ratted and peeling, posture hunched, beady eyes rimmed with red, streaks wending down their cheeks like cracks in glass. Each held a staff, the long, curved blades at the end carved from bone. One of them looked Shade's way for a scant moment. His tongue licked blackened, cracked lips. Shade had only seen men like this twice before in his life, but there was no doubt who—and what—they were.

Scourgers. After two weeks, they had finally shown their faces, and with no warning. *Shit*, thought Shade.

Abe and Meesh had stopped singing though their instruments still hummed. Shade glanced to the side to see that both his brothers in duty were looking his way. Abe appeared disappointed; Meesh, excited. Meesh's blue-gray eyes widened as he jutted his chin toward the corner of the short stage, where their instrument cases were propped against the wall. Both Shade and Abe shook their heads. The confines of the tavern were too restricting to use ranged weapons. Shade shifted on his stool just in case, locked his elbow in preparation to reach for the hilt affixed to his belt.

Just as he did so, the five Scourgers rushed toward the drunken, oblivious patrons with weapons held high, while behind them another six barged through the swinging doors. Their mouths opened wide; high-pitched shrieks escaped their throats. Shade, Meesh, and Abe dropped their instruments and surged to their feet. Burrell the barkeep turned with a start, his flesh gone white as he reached for his iron rod. The other patrons turned as well. Some men, including the two who'd almost brawled, pulled out their meager knives and prepared to fight, others knocked over stools and each other in their attempts to flee. One of the Scourgers leapt over the bar and tackled the proprietor. The three men who'd been watching Shade and his brothers perform slipped out of their chairs and rushed to his aid.

It seemed men had each other's backs here in Barrendale. A rare trait for a backwater. The knights exchanged a look and jumped from the stage to join the fray. Shade gripped the handle of his sword and plucked it from his belt. Vibrations coursed through him as man and Eldersword connected. The Rush took hold. He lashed his arm forward, the segmented blade extending outward from the hilt, three feet long and glimmering silver. The grooves along the flat of the Eldersword glowed, reflecting the mental state of the bearer. Had he been panicked, it would have shone gold; were he angry, it would flare a deep crimson. His blade gleamed a brilliant blue, the color of certainty.

The Scourgers moved quickly, their curved staffs leaving three tavern patrons on the floor in their wake. Four of the Scourgers pivoted at the sound of the knights' approach and hunkered down. Shade knocked aside a table and ran straight ahead, sword held by his ear. He could hear it humming, the Rush bringing vigor to his muscles. The soreness in his fingers evaporated; muscles cramped from bending over his guitar burned with renewed energy. To his left and right came Meesh and Abe. Their swords glowed just as brilliantly as his.

Shade fell on the first of the Scourgers, his Eldersword buzzing as it cut through the air. His target ducked beneath the blow, hissed as he swung his staff in a looping arc toward Shade's feet. Shade leapt over the staff, which scraped against the dirt floor, and then slashed his blade and clipped the Scourger in the throat. Thick, dark blood poured from the wound, drenching the disfigured man's dirty frock. His reddened eyes grew wide as Shade rammed a foot against his staff and snapped it in half, its bone blade shattering on the ground. Shade lopped off the Scourger's head with a single blow.

The Eldersword's hum grew louder in his head as he quickly took in the scene. Five of the Scourgers had somehow been felled; six remained standing. Abe took on two of them to the left of the bar, deftly parrying and dodging continued attacks from the Scourgers' bladed staffs. The one Meesh battled wielded not only his staff, but the fallen barkeep's iron rod, and Meesh's sword *clanged* each time the two weapons met. The remaining three were locked in deadly combat with tavern patrons.

Shade cursed the cramped confines of the tavern, chancing a longing glance over his shoulder at his guitar case. He wanted Rosetta in his grip, preferring the thundermaker to the sword. A couple of blasts from Rosetta's muzzle and the fight would be over.

He rushed to the aid of the patrons. One of the Scourgers spun around at the last moment, lashing out with his staff. Shade hopped to the side, the bone blade only just missing his arm. His heel connected with an overturned chair and Shade stumbled. The Scourger took the offensive, lurching into him, knocking him backward. Shade fell to the dirt floor; the Scourger landed atop him, knocking the air from his lungs and pinning his sword arm. Shade gasped as his opponent made a lunging attempt to bite his neck. His forearm found the man's throat and halted his momentum; jagged teeth *clacked* just centimeters in front of Shade's face. Then the Scourger pressed in, trying to bite again, and his pelvis lifted ever so slightly. Shade rammed his knee into the Scourger's backside. The deformed man lurched forward and let out a surprised yelp. Shade slid out from under him and, with his arm now free, jammed his Eldersword through the back of the Scourger's head. The tip exited his left eye socket with a sickening *pop*.

And still Shade's blade sang.

The Scourger pitched forward, the sword slid out of his skull, and Shade flicked his wrist to rid the blade of the blood. A growl left his throat as he spun around. His sword glowed in bright swirls of blue and red, thirsting for more.

But there was no more to be had, for the chaos ended when Abe decapitated the last Scourger. Shade cast his eyes to the side, saw the tavern's surviving patrons panting as they hovered over the corpses of five attackers. The eleven Scourgers had killed four of Barrendale's citizens; five more lay on the ground, moaning and bleeding. Burrell was back on his feet, though he favored his right side, and a wicked gash marred the underside of his jaw. The man looked up from his dead patrons to Shade, grimaced, and shook his head. Shade nodded in reply before moving toward the center of the room with Abe and Meesh. The three Knights Eternal stared at the door and waited for more Scourgers to enter. None did.

Only after they had decided it was safe did the knights retract their swords; the blades collapsed in on themselves until nothing but the hilts remained. When Shade placed the hilt back on its clip, the vibrations that gave his muscles strength disappeared, and his bloodlust faded. He spread a dusty blanket in front of the stage. Abe and Meesh began gathering up the Scourger corpses so they could be disposed of in the desert, while Shade tended to the five wounded. One man held the gaping maw of his abdomen, crying as he stared up at the ceiling. Shade yanked his skinning knife from his belt and slipped the tip between the man's ribs, piercing his heart and ending his pain.

One of the surviving patrons behind him moaned. Shade glanced up to see a young man kneeling there, hands clasped in front of his face.

"Don't just sit there," said Shade. "Do something."

"Go find Barbara," stated Burrell in a deep voice. "Tell her Paddy's dead. And check on those who'd been assigned watch tonight. Find out why they didn't send out a warning. They'd better be dead."

Tears flowed from the young man's eyes as he shuffled to his feet and dashed out the tavern door.

"Thanks," Shade said.

Burrell limped to the bar and removed a jug. He lumbered toward another of the injured men and poured whiskey into his mouth.

Not five minutes later, the tavern again teemed with life as the now-frightened residents of Barrendale entered. Three of the wounded were taken to the village apothecary; the fourth died from his many wounds before they could carry him out. People approached the knights and ranted to Shade, Abe, and Meesh that the stories they'd told the knights had been accurate—the Scourgers were growing bold, venturing down from the mountain homes.

"I know," Shade repeated over and over. Inside, he was just thankful that the people didn't blame *them* for what had happened, an experience he knew quite well.

When the chaos finally eased, Shade approached his fellow warriors in faith.

"I'm too old for this," said Abe. He traced the five-pointed star of the Pentus on his chest.

"Bullshit," Meesh said as he tied back his long, wavy hair with a piece of twine. "I think we ended it too quickly."

Abe rolled his eyes. "Too quick? What's wrong with you?"

"Hey, don't judge me, brah. You can't tell me that wasn't a thrill. And besides, look at Shade. He feels it too."

Shade said nothing.

Meesh nudged him. "C'mon, man. I know how you get when these things end."

"Brother," said Abe, "leave the man alone."

"Why? He can take it. He's a big boy."

Shade let out a deep breath. Meesh was right—lately he had come to feel horrible in the aftermath of these conflicts. Without music or fighting, there was nothing to keep his thoughts from straying to what he'd lost. This meant he had to look forward to a morning of unwanted memories and reflection. But he would never admit it. He could never admit to the men he trusted most that he'd come so very close to breaking his vows.

"Shut it, Meesh," Shade muttered. "We need to get rid of these corpses before they stink up the place."



Abe stood with his brothers at the front of the two hundred Barrendale natives who watched the fire consume their dead. Crackling flames licked the sky, beckoning dawn. Burrell stood at the head of the assembly alongside Quint Nolan, who called himself the shantytown's mayor.

"Let us pray," Quint said. Abe and his brothers clasped their hands. The townspeople did not.

All remained silent as Quint rambled on with his prayer to the five prophets that comprised the Pentus. Though the words of the prayer were wrong, Abe felt grateful they were praying at all. Missionaries from Sal Yaddo had obviously been here in the past—they'd been pretty much *everywhere* in the Wasteland—but it wasn't often they succeeded in conversion.

The wind shifted, and Abe wrinkled his nose as the reek of roasting flesh invaded his nostrils. With both his hands occupied, he ducked his nose beneath the collar of his shirt and gritted his teeth. Smoke swelled around the congregation. The people standing in front of him began coughing.

"We ask the Ferrymaster to watch over their souls as they drift along the River of the Dead," Quint coughed out, hastening the end of his prayer. "Praise the Five-In-One."

"Praise be," the crowd answered halfheartedly.

With the service over, the people quickly shuffled from the pyre to get away from the billowing smoke. Families gathered in small clusters, clinging tight to their mates, while others seemed worried or annoyed. "They're lucky," said a woman whose face was gnarled by time and the elements. "Least they don't gotta smell themselves no longer."

Abe stifled a chuckle while Meesh outright guffawed. Shade remained with his hands in the pockets of his duster, head down, the brim of his hat pulled low. Abe frowned. His brother was a broken man now, angry most of the time. He wasn't anything like the awestruck and eager soul who had materialized in the center of the Hallowed Stones six years ago. Abe had no idea what had caused the change.

He'll tell me when he's ready, he thought.

In truth, he wasn't so sure.

"Brah, I'm gonna go get a pint," said Meesh as he tugged on Abe's sleeve. "C'mon, join me. Burrell's swill might be nasty, but at least it gets ya loaded."

Abe glanced at the sky, the shade of light purple that came right before daybreak. "At this hour? We can't afford to."

Meesh shrugged. "Bah! I like to greet the day in a drunken haze. Seems appropriate."

"I think not," Abe said.

"Fine. Suit yourself." Meesh turned to Shade. "How 'bout you, grumpy? You game?"

Shade's eyes darted to the side. There was so much fury in them, so much angst. He ran his fingers through his thick black beard and left without a word.

"Guess I'm on my own then," Meesh said, backing away with a salute. "Party poopers."

Abe watched his brothers depart. Shade ambled toward the stone shanty they had called home for two weeks, while Meesh

quickstepped in the direction of Burrell's tavern. Like every edifice in Barrendale, the two structures had been carved into the large rock formations common in the lower Wasteland. Abe considered his brothers, let his collar drop now that the wind had shifted again and the smoke and stench of burning flesh weren't so overwhelming. Both Shade and Meesh were damaged in their own ways. Hell, even Abe was. They'd all been burned by their duties more than once. They'd all seen horrors that would have caused lesser men to wither away.

But they weren't lesser men. They were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, knights crafted by the ten hands of the Pentus himself. Sal Yaddo, the island kingdom he and his brothers called home, was the hub of Pentmatarianism, and the small order of the Knights Eternal was the Pentus's sword. Which made Abe's current state of mind worrisome.

He'd come into the world as a grown man, stocked with preternatural knowledge, even if that wisdom didn't always match the environment in which he lived. Most times, the trouble came from simple words—the language spoken in most of the Wasteland was called Straightspeak, but Abe knew it as *English*; the second weapon he'd been given when sworn into the knighthood was labeled a blitzer, but his brothers called it a *railgun*. Then there were the odd feelings he sometimes experienced when doing tasks as simple as relieving himself. In those moments, his surroundings seemed alien, as if there was some other place he should be.

Abe sighed, staring at the dying fire and the husks of corpses that burned within. He wasn't content, and it bothered him. He had spent thirty years wandering this desolate land, protecting the innocent from brigands, tyrants, and the demons that crawled out of the Nine Hells, yet he craved more. Reverend Garron had told him long ago that the Knights Eternal were the most blessed men in all of creation, beings brought into the world instinctively understanding a separate form of art, and yet over thirty years he had watched three Shadrachs and five Meshachs die, men who had been just as much brothers to him as Shade and Meesh were now, each with their own distinct personalities and appearance. Why would the Pentus allow so many of his most blessed creations to perish? And why had each of his past brothers admitted to a strange emptiness inside, like Abe was feeling now?

Abe wanted clarity. He wanted the strange dreams that haunted his sleep to end. Over the last half-year, he had begun wondering if something else existed out there for him, questioning if Reverend Garron had told him the whole truth. He recalled the last words of

the second Shadrach he'd called brother: "*Fantasia para dois pianos...*" There had been such lucidity in his eyes even though the words were gibberish. Abe wished he could experience the same sort of clarity, but all he had to show for his efforts were a sore back, aching knees, and fingers that had begun to grow stiff with age—ailments that only left him when he held that wicked Eldersword in his hands. He knew that he was closing in on a time when even that wondrous singing blade wouldn't help him. Would he be given answers then? And if so, would those answers simply be a mirage brought on by imminent death?

Stop thinking this way, he told himself. It's blasphemy!

Instead of heading back into the village, he walked straight past the corpses smoldering in the pyre and toward Barrendale's main source of food, positioned behind a rocky outcropping. It was a field of short corn, the only crop that would take root in the Wasteland's hard-packed soil. Another plume of smoke curled skyward behind the field. Abe cut through the stalks.

He emerged on the other side and stared down at a second heap of bodies. The people of Barrendale had tossed the dead Scourgers in a pile and used them like dried dung to fuel the flames. Their flesh had blackened and melted into one another, making the mass look like a single hellish creature of multiple arms, legs, and heads that had crawled out of the Nine Hells. Abe smiled softly. He had actually *seen* a beast like that once, up near Sal Morrow about fifteen years ago. Defeating that demon had been a feat worthy of legend. He thought for a moment that he should go to Shade and reminisce. Perhaps that would lift his brother from his funk.

But the current Shade hadn't been there; it had been a previous incarnation. Abe's smile disappeared.

He squinted at the bulk of roasted flesh and stared at a single blackened, eyeless face. "What're you doing so far from home?" he asked quietly. He pivoted toward the west, where the misty rise of the Rocklaw Mountains blotted out the horizon. The deep red of the rising sun infused the mist with eerie crimson and gold hues. His heart thudded. *I'm too old for this*, he thought for the second time that night. His hand brushed aside his coat; his fingers touched the hilt of his Eldersword. His edginess melted away, if only for a moment. He appreciated it, even though he disliked the weapon. To Abe, the sword was as much blight as it was blessing.

I should pray. Cleanse myself.

A shrill whistle caught his attention just before he knelt. Abe looked toward Barrendale and saw a woman atop one of the many rock formations, arms flailing above her head. Even from a distance he knew it was Lilah Nolan, Quint's wife.

"Damn," he said aloud.

Abe put one foot in front of the other and edged his way back through the beige corn. He remembered something he'd been told by the first Shadrach he'd known, a doomed man with a chiseled chin, flowing gray hair, and an almost ethereal talent for woodwinds. *"It's best to stay busy. Keeping your mind on the moment is the most effective way to stop thinking about all the things you'll never understand. Let the Pentus take the rest."*

There was certainly a beautiful truth to that, even though his brother hadn't taken the advice himself.



Meesh's eyes flicked back and forth as he watched his brothers speak with Quint Nolan.

"I *told* you," Quint said, eyes showing a hint of madness. "You said there's no way, but I *told* you."

"You did," Abe replied. "But you do understand that we had to witness an attack first, correct? I've been policing the Wasteland in the Pentus's name for more than thirty years, and I've never once heard of Scourgers straying from their own lands."

"Why would I lie about it?"

Behind Meesh, the red light of the early morning sun ratcheted up the desert heat. He, his brothers, and Quint stood on the western edge of the village; the Rocklaw Mountains, home of the Scourgers, loomed ominously in the distance.

"Because we're used to people not liking us," Abe said. "Wouldn't be the first time someone made up a story to put us in a situation where they'd be rid of us."

Quint's mouth drew into a thin white line. "Well, that's not us, thank you very much. We rather like having you around. But now you have your proof. Only took the deaths of six of my people to get it."

Meesh rolled his eyes. "Would've been less if the scuds you had keeping watch on the mountains didn't fall asleep on the damn job."

"They were tired," Quint retorted. "Life ain't easy down here."

"Life? You call this life?" Meesh let out a laugh.

Quint frowned at him. "Might not be much," he said softly, "but it's something."

"Brah, you're nutty. Trudgin' in the dust all day and sleeping in caves at night ain't no way to live."

"Yes, it is." The man turned away, regarded the settlement he governed. "At least brigands and demons don't come down to the borderlands. At least we don't have to live in fear."

"Course not... not with Scourgers running around all over the—"

Abe yanked on Meesh's shoulder, silencing him. Meesh held up his hands in supplication and backed away. Quint shook his head.

"Herr Nolan," said Abe, "can we have a moment of privacy?"

The man nodded and stepped away.

With Quint out of earshot, the three brothers gathered close together. Meesh chuckled as Abe eyed him with disappointment. "Sorry, Dad," Meesh said.

"Do you have to provoke them?" the older man asked.

"Why not? Where's the fun in being so serious?"

"There's a time and place. Now's not it. The Pentus wouldn't approve."

"Says you." Meesh slapped Shade on the shoulder. "I like to think our creator's got a sense of humor. How 'bouts *you*, brah? You think I'm outta line?"

Shade stared at him coldly.

"Fine," Meesh said with a sigh. "Remind me why I'm still with you guys?"

Abe smirked. "Because as odd as it might seem, we're brothers."

"Touché," said Meesh. "Got me there."

At times Meesh did find it odd that he would think of two black dudes as his brothers, but he couldn't figure out why he felt that way. Not that he worried about such things. He didn't question much about the way he came to be; he enjoyed life too much to question much of anything at all. *Best leave the pondering to Abe. It's what he's good at.*

"So, the Scourgers are coming down off the mountain," Shade said. Meesh nearly jumped at the sound of his voice; Shade hadn't spoken a word since the scuffle in Burrell's tavern. "Does that fit in with what the Oracle said?"

Abe put his hand under his chin, appearing deep in thought. "Not sure. Let's look at the riddle again."

Both sets of eyes turned to Meesh, who exhaled deeply and reached beneath his leather vest. They had gone over this countless times. He