

# VOWBREAKER

2 THE KNIGHTS ETERNAL

ROBERT J. DUPERRE

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**BOOK TWO**

**Robert J. Duperre**

THE KNIGHTS ETERNAL: VOWBREAKER

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*For Beverly Jenkins,  
whose influence forms the emotional core of this book.*

# The Wasteland of Gussai



*Should one sheep in one hundred turn up missing, it would be irresponsible of the shepherd to abandon the loyal in service of the lost. It is the obligation of the sinner to discover why they went astray. Celebrate the faithful, for they have not left your side.*

—Book of the Pentus, Allegories 6:12

**A**s he took one laborious step after another, Shade concluded that there was nothing in the world worse than the cold. Not demons from the Nine Hells, not morally bankrupt brigands, not immortal undead-controlling fiends with visions of grandeur. He had survived all of those. The cold, on the other hand, was about to do him in.

Snow billowed all around, and flecks of sleet assaulted his face like a million wasp stings. His thick beard had frozen solid, becoming a weight that pulled down his chin. Fully buttoning his duster and pulling it up over his nose did no good because the stiff leather chafed his flesh just as badly as the ice and wind.

After clawing at another rocky ledge with bone-numb fingers, Shade pulled himself upright. He turned around, staring at the downward expanse of never-ending white. It was like Lemsburg and the outer Wasteland had ceased to exist. He didn't know how far up the mountain he had climbed, nor how long he had been moving. It

seemed like days. It could have been longer. And yet he still struggled ever upward, seeking passage to a land that he was not sure existed.

*Why?*

Because his dying brother had told him to, and his dead lover had confirmed it.

*I've made worse decisions based on less*, he thought, and laughed through his shivers. Meesh would have been proud.

Thinking of his brother brought his laughter to a sputtering end. Meesh, who never met a joke he wouldn't tell, no matter how stupid. Meesh, whose zest for simply *living* used to be enough to break Shade from his doldrums. Meesh, who would eventually hunt him down and end his life.

Shade slumped down into a mound of snow, sinking in up to his chest. His head drooped, his eyes fluttered closed, and he debated whether he should go on. What good was this quest if his own brother would eventually come to kill him? And it wasn't as if he could blame Meesh for that. The Pentus had brought him and his brothers into the world for a reason—to protect the innocent, to spread joy through music, and to send demons back to the Nine Hells. Meesh and the new Abednego would simply be doing what they were supposed to in hunting him. Shade, and Shade alone, was the one who had broken his sacred vows.

"Stop it," he muttered into the wind. "The Pentus isn't real."

He was stalling again, ruminating—his constant pattern ever since he lost Vera. He could not do that any longer. He owed it to her, and to Abe, and even to Meesh, to do everything he could to find the truth.

With that thought, he forced himself to renew his upward trek. The wind continued its assault, fluttering his duster and trying to force him back. It was only when he reached a natural channel bordered by two jagged stone walls that he was able to regain his footing. He felt his heartbeat through his fingertips as he used the rock face to steady himself. His feet ached. His usually dark skin was ashen and felt like crinkled paper. He slid his hand across a sharp wedge of stone and a cut opened on his palm. Blood trickled out, thick as syrup.

Shade tucked his hands into the sleeves of his duster and cursed the fact he hadn't brought gloves. Truth be told, there were many things he wished he'd had the foresight to obtain before this journey. A pair of heavy undergarments would have helped, along with a woolen cap and boots that wouldn't fray from the constant moisture and cold. When exhaustion struck him and his eyes drifted half-mast, he thought that perhaps it hadn't been the brightest move to discard his Eldersword at the Hallowed Stones. Sure, he'd tossed aside the ancient weapon out of principle—he had abandoned his sacred duty as a knight, why should he continue carrying a knight's weapon?—but he sure could use the healing energy of the Rush right about now. The torrent of energy that surged through him when holding his old Eldersword would've dulled the worst of his pain, at least for a little while. The deceased Ronan Cooper's saber, which hung from his hip and thwacked painfully against his knee with every other step, was useless by comparison. As was the guitar strapped across his back, which made it difficult to keep his balance.

His foot struck something beneath the snow, and he fell like a toppled monument. The guitar case flipped up, whacking the back of his head hard enough to bring stars. Intense, hard coldness slipped upward against his side, then disappeared. Rising onto his knees, Shade patted himself down. The revolver he'd stolen from Meesh was no longer tucked in his belt. He thrust his hands into the snow, searching until his numb fingertips thwacked against a wedge of cold steel. He lifted the gun, swept ice from the barrel, jammed it back into his belt. This wasn't the first time he had dropped the burner. Add *holster* to the ever-growing list of things he should have taken with him.

What made it all worse was that Lupe, his Warhorse, had mentioned all of this to him before he started the trek. The tinny voice coming out of the hovering machine had berated him constantly after he abandoned his brothers. *"You really should gather some things to protect yourself from the elements,"* it had said. *"You don't know where you're going. Only an idiot would start a journey blind to the path,"* it had scoffed. *"Please think about what you're doing before you leave,"* it had finally



pleaded. But of course, Shade hadn't listened. He was too desperate to get the hell out of the Wasteland and find answers. So he'd stowed Lupe in a trench halfway up the mountain—the Warhorse had been adamant it would not be any help to him when the ground pitched at an angle greater than forty degrees—and went off on his own.

*Lupe was right*, he thought. *A freaking machine has more sense than me.*

He rolled his eyes, stretched his unsteady legs, and kept moving. Onward and upward. Ever upward.

The channel ended, exposing him fully to nature's wrath once more. Shade hobbled out in the open, his muscles screaming, his head spinning. It was getting much darker now than it had been when he'd entered the channel. He wondered whether the sun was setting or if his eyes were starting to fail him.

Either option would be disastrous. He'd already spent multiple nights out in the open. Just the thought of another few hours spent tucked under the snow trying to keep warm filled him with dread. He considered the weight of the guitar on his back. Perhaps if he could find some shelter, he could put the instrument to good use. Playing it might not be an option, but it *was* made mostly of wood, and he had a pair of flintstones in his pocket...

*No.* He gripped the part of the case that protruded over his shoulder with one freezing hand. The only shelter he had found during this futile journey was the partially concealed channel he just exited. Even if he could shield himself from the wind and snow enough to get a fire going, the meager fuel the guitar provided wouldn't last long. Was he really willing to burn his most prized possession for a few fleeting moments of warmth?

The survivor in him said *yes*. The musician said *hell no*.

The musician won.

As he trudged along, the steadying darkness turned his surroundings gray. The falling snow now resembled blowing ash. He reached a formidable wall of bleak stone that stretched out as far as he could see in either direction. His already sunken spirits dropped even further. He lifted his head—his neck creaked like a rusty hinge—and realized he stood at the base of another cliff. He brought his freezing hands to

his mouth, blew on them, and pondered his next step. He could walk the length of the cliff to see if he could find a way around, or he could climb. The rock face seemed to have plenty of handholds and it was only thirty feet tall. Perhaps forty. It was hard to tell with the dim light and billowing snow.

“I’ve climbed steeper,” he said, thinking of the times he and Meesh had raced up the face of the largest crag in the Red Cliffs. The sorrow of betrayal squeezed in on him again. He put it out of his mind.

And he climbed.

Not yet halfway up, Shade regretted his choice. His fingers bled from jabbing them into gaps in the stone, and his toes screamed in pain when they bent backward while trying to gain footholds. Every part of him ached and his breath came out ragged. He paused for a moment to get his bearings, feeling the full weight of all the useless junk he carried, and then reached his right hand up for another weight-bearing protrusion. His fingertips, now painted with red crystals, jammed into the gap. He forced his arm to flex, pulling himself upward. His right foot slid up as well, the toe of his boot coming to rest against an outcropping. After another deep breath, he shoved off as hard as he could, trying to take the pressure off his arm.

Another gust of wind blew, carrying with it a thunderous howl as loud as a hellbeast’s bleating. The sound rattled Shade as he pressed too hard against the stone ledge beneath his right foot. The rock crumbled and both his legs lost purchase, sending him into a series of spastic windmill kicks. The added weight, combined with his fatigue, made him lose his grip with his less-dominant right hand. He hung there by four numb and aching fingerbones, flopping like a fish out of water, crying out into the wind.

That howl pierced his eardrums again, and Shade lost his grip entirely. He flipped head over heels as he plummeted. Time seemed to slow. For a split second, he could see the white, snowy ground he careened toward, only fifteen or twenty feet away at most. *That’s not too far*, he thought during the moment of calm that comes before tragedy. *I survived a fight with the master of the dead. This should be a piece of ca—*

He fell into the snow back-first. His guitar case took the brunt of the blow when he struck bedrock, jerking his spine severely, knocking the air from his lungs and causing his extremities to explode with white-hot fire. His head struck the ground with such force that the world around him went black, then blinding white, then black again. That strange howl washed over him like a harbinger from the Nine Hells come to claim his soul.

*It's over,* he thought meekly. His body wouldn't obey him when he tried to move. Likely his back was broken. If that were true, he knew his fate would be to simply lie out here in the elements, waiting to either freeze to death or for whatever beast made that horrific sound to rip him limb from limb. He would never be a knight again. Never honor Abe. Never find the truth. Never get the chance to plead with Meesh to spare his life.

Oddly, none of that really bothered him. Wondering if his brothers would ever find his body, did.

That ominous howl continued. Using the last of his strength, Shade succeeded in pivoting his head. His vision was half obstructed by both agony and a layer of snow, but he was able to see something out there in the burgeoning darkness that caused his heart to thump and the breath to wheeze in his throat.

A pair of figures cloaked in shadow approached through the dim void. One walked on two legs, the other on four. Shade knew who they were: Hadden, the guardian of the Nine Hells, and his faithful hound Sereberus, come to claim his soul and deliver it to Fawkes the Sorter, who would then decide what kind of torment a blasphemous monster such as Shadrach the Twentieth deserved to suffer for the rest of eternity.

"I'm sorry," Shade whispered. His eyes, rimmed with frozen tears, squeezed shut. The outside world went dark and soon his inner world did too. In the moment when he greeted oblivion, he found relief in the fact that he wasn't cold anymore.

As Abe would have said, it's the little things that matter most.



The sight of gawking masses sent waves of giddiness through his body. He stared out at the crowd—faces as far as he could see, gathered beneath an overcast sky, silent in their reverence—and lifted his guitar. The feedback from the amplifiers buzzed in his ears.

As the moment captured him, he did what he did best. He picked note after note with his capable left hand, while his right danced between frets. The sounds he created were jarring, a spiraling cacophony of off-key tones that transformed a once beloved hymn into the celebration of chaotic violence he always believed it to be.

The crowd ate it up. They grew steadily more agitated, until the very end, when he threw back his head and let loose with the frenzied climax. The sounds infused him with vigor, with desire, with *purpose*.

This was what he was always meant to do, to blend all his life's doubts and fears and hardships into this one pure moment of abstract art. It was only in times like these that he felt truly free.

Shade's eyes fluttered open and the song faded away. His ears stopped ringing and his fingers stopped tingling. When his vision cleared, he found himself sprawled out on his back on a slatted wood floor. A musty blanket covered him and a fire crackled in a large stone hearth a few feet away. He smiled at the marvelous warmth, but that smile disappeared when he realized he didn't know where he was or how he had gotten here.

He stretched his arms and legs tentatively and arched his back. There was pain, but a bearable amount. *No broken bones. Lucky*. He pushed the blankets off his body and inched himself to sitting. Glancing around, he saw that he was in what looked to be a log cabin consisting of a single large room. The cabin had many windows looking out onto a brightening but still snowy world. Combined with the fireplace, those windows allowed enough light in that he could see the rest of his surroundings clearly.

There was a couch behind Shade, serving to section off a portion of the vast space. Propped on the center cushion was his unbroken guitar case, the neck rising above the cushions like a beacon of hope. A short table stood against the couch, atop which Shade's neatly-folded duster, Cooper's saber, and Meesh's pistol was stacked. Someone had definitely taken

pride in their presentation; it looked like a shrine. He cocked his head and listened but no sound came to him other than the crackle of flames.

His knees creaked when he stood up, and he groaned at the soreness running up and down his spine. He limped to the table and snatched up the saber—it hurt to bend to the side like that—and slid the blade free from its scabbard. When no demons appeared to flay him, he went about searching the rest of the room.

The place was filled with oddities that would have been a rarity in the Wasteland. Tables and chairs with hollow aluminum legs; books with glossy covers reflecting the firelight; panels with switches embedded in the walls; a mounted black mirror similar to the ones in the Heartcube chamber of the Cooper Station; a couple of darkened globes hanging from the ceiling indicating electric lighting. The room was divided into sections—the den around the hearth, a sleeping nook with a large four-poster bed, a dining space with a small table with two chairs, and even a kitchen, complete with an oven and a large white refrigeration unit that constantly hummed. The only door into or out of the cabin was to the right of the unit. A placard stating *Keep Calm Shit Happens* was nailed on the door.

All of it, baffling. Shade rubbed his eyes and re-sheathed his saber.

He wandered back to the warmth of the hearth, held his hands out, and rubbed them together. None of this made any sense. One minute he was on the mountain, near death after falling from the cliff, and the next he was here. Perhaps he really *had* died, and this was where he had to wait for the Ferrymaster to row him to the Crystalline Hall. *No, that's not right.* He had seen the shadows approaching. If this was a waystation, it belonged to the forces of darkness, not the Pentus.

*The Pentus doesn't exist.*

The blasphemous thought made him shudder. He turned away from the fire, approached the bookshelf beside the hearth, and ran his calloused fingertips along the spines. So many strange books with nonsensical titles, written by authors whose names seemed foreign yet somehow familiar. *Babel-17* by Samuel R. Delaney, *The Penguin Science Fiction Omnibus* by Brian Wilson Aldiss, *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A.

A. Milne, *Imperium and Imperio* by Sutton E. Griggs, *Blonde on Blonde Songbook* by Bob Dylan. He paused at that last one.

His eyes drifted closed, and he found himself back in the dream that he had nearly forgotten after waking up.

The scene shifted. No longer did he hold a guitar in his hands, but a rifle. His clothes were thick and uncomfortable and patterned in shifting greens and browns. He soared in a steel bird high in the air, something heavy and ungainly strapped to his back. Someone shoved him, and he screamed as he plummeted, falling much too quickly toward the earth below, surrounded on all sides by men who shared his fate...

A *clank*, followed by the scrape of wood sliding over wood, broke him out of the untimely hallucination. Shade spun around, hunkering down in a defensive pose. He grabbed the handle of the saber and kept his breath steady. If this unknown fiend decided to test his mettle, Shade would be prepared.

Only it wasn't a fiend that entered the cabin, but a man dressed head-to-toe in heavy garb. A large dog hustled in after him. The man shoved the door closed, sealing out the wind and cold, and audibly sighed when he leaned against it.

The dog spotted Shade first. It took a few pattering steps forward, bright hazel eyes that seemed far too intelligent for a canine taking in seemingly every inch of him. It had a long snout, short black hair, large floppy ears, and a long whipping tail. The dog barked at its master. The man's shoulders tensed. Eyes hidden by draped fabric stared Shade's way.

"You're awake. Cool. Sorry I wasn't here for it. Sucks when your only bathroom's outside."

The man kicked himself off the door, patted the dog with a gloved hand, and began to remove his clothing. He did all of this, as if having a Knight Eternal standing fifteen feet away was the most normal thing in the world.

"Who are you?" Shade growled.

The stranger unwound the scarf from around his neck and pulled off his woolen hat, revealing a middle-aged man with pale skin, dark

eyes, and a head of moppish dark hair gone gray at the temples. He gave Shade a sideways smirk. "I have been called many names," he said as he unbuttoned his jacket. "Only a few of which are pronounceable by the human tongue."

"Such as?" He pulled the saber a few inches out of the scabbard. "Are you a demon?"

The man hung his jacket on a hook and winced. "Shit. Idiot. Yeah, no demon here. Sorry 'bout that. Feeling my oats a bit, and a little nervous. It's not everyday someone famous literally falls out of the sky right in front of you."

Shade glared.

"Jesus, you're serious," the man said, sounding disappointed. "The name's Ken. Ken Lowery." He pointed at the black dog, who'd joined his side once again. "And that's Silas."

"Ken. Silas." Shade relaxed ever so slightly. "Where are we?"

"Everywhere. Nowhere. On the top of a goddamn mountain." He sighed. "You thirsty? Beer okay?"

When Shade didn't answer, Ken muttered something under his breath and approached the refrigeration unit. He grabbed a handle hidden on the side, and the front facing swung open.

"Lager's all I got," Ken said, snatching a pair of glass bottles. "Hope that's okay. I don't really got a choice. I just drink and eat whatever they give me."

Moving with the nonchalance of someone without an ounce of fear for his life, Ken approached him and held out the bottle. Shade took it mindlessly.

"Cheers," Ken said and took a swig.

Something bumped against Shade's leg. He glanced down to see the dog, Silas, sitting at his feet, mouth opened wide, tongue flapping. He patted the dog's head. It was an automatic action, done without thinking. Silas, panting, seemed to smile. Shade's tension eased even more.

"Yeah, he's a great boy," Ken said as he wandered to one of the wall panels and flicked a switch. The electric lights hanging from the ceiling came on, brightening the cabin. "The best."

"How did I get here?" Shade asked. He couldn't stop looking into Silas's far-too-intelligent eyes.

Ken pulled the table away from the couch and plopped down onto it. "Si and me were out in the blizzard looking for you. Si howled when he caught your scent, but we didn't get to you until you'd already fallen off the cliff. We dragged you back here on a sled."

"You were looking for me?" Shade froze in place, blinking rapidly. "You knew I'd be here?"

"Well, yeah."

"Who *are* you?"

Again, Ken shrugged. "Just a guy who got held up on the way to seeing his wife. Which sucks, but hey, the universe works in mysterious ways, right?" He laughed; it was a sad sound. "Anyway, I'm a sorta lighthouse keeper, I guess. Put here to greet travelers when they've lost their way and put them back on the right path. So they don't die out there in the snow and low oxygen. You know, the usual."

"You get a lot of people wandering up onto the mountain?"

"Nope," Ken said with a chuckle. "You're the first."

"How long have you been here?"

"Too long."

Shade sipped the surprisingly tasty beer while he mulled it over. None of this made any sense. It hurt his brain thinking about it. Silas nudged him, demanding his attention. Shade lowered himself to the floor and allowed the dog to lick his bearded face. A genuine smile creased his chapped lips.

"How'd you know I'd be coming?" he asked when Silas finally stopped licking him and curled his large canine body into his lap.

"Someone left instructions," said Ken.

"Instructions?"

Ken pointed toward a hefty wooden chest that Shade hadn't thought twice about when he first explored the room. "Every seven days I get supplies. I empty that chest there and leave it outside. When I get up in the morning, it's filled with everything I'll need to survive all by my lonesome up here. Well, this week's delivery came with lotsa



stuff I wasn't expecting, including a letter telling me I'd have my first visitor." He spread his hands out wide. "And here you are."

"I'd like to see this letter."

"Sure." He reached into his shirt, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and slid it across the floor to where Shade sat.

The paper was crisp and sturdy, unlike any paper Shade had seen before, even in Sal Yaddo. It felt... new. He opened the letter. The message was short and nonsensical: *Your favorite guitarist is coming. You'll find him out by the northwestern cliff. Don't let him die. He's important.*

"That's all?" Shade asked, letting the paper dangle between his pinched thumb and forefinger.

"That's all."

His eyes narrowed. "Your favorite guitarist? You know of me?"

"Sure."

"How?"

"Dude, I've loved you since I was a kid. First tape I ever owned was one of yours. My dad and I would rock out in the car to it all the time." When Shade gave him a disparaging look, Ken shook his head. "Okay, so it wasn't *you* you, but that's beside the point, so just forget I said anything. Because I know who you are *now*. I know you're Shadrach, twentieth Knight Eternal of your name, and that you prefer to be called Shade. I know about Abe and Meesh, too, how you all came to be, what happened to Vera, Ronan Cooper, the Heartcubes, Asaph the Collector, everything. I know you hopped dimensions fighting Asaph, and I know you think Vera brought you back. But she didn't. Someone else did. Someone who appreciates everything you did to protect those who couldn't protect themselves."

Shade wanted to laugh aloud at the ridiculousness of it all. But there was something about Ken's tone that gave him pause. Or perhaps it was the comfort of the dog breathing deeply in his lap. Either way, he did not scoff, or turn away, or storm out of the cabin in frustration. Instead, he gave the man the sincerest look he could and asked, "Was it you? Are you a god?"

"Me? Oh, that's rich." The laugh that vibrated from Ken's throat was earnest enough to be disarming. "If I was, you think I'd be hanging

out *here*? I'm just a guy. Wrong place, right time. Or something like that. I just *know things*. Don't know how, but I know why. Because I unwittingly connected to everything that's happened here, in this world and the next. I was here before this place technically existed. My actions allowed it to be created." He paused, tapped a finger against his lip. "Y'know, now that I say it out loud, maybe that *does* make me a god. Wow. Go me."

"You, my friend, are an odd one," Shade said.

Ken grinned. "You called me friend. Now I can die in peace. Again."

Before Shade could ask what that meant, Ken rose off the table, went to the chest, and knelt before it. With a flick of his wrist, the lock popped open, and he flipped up the heavy lid. Silas gave Shade another knowing look before doing another adorable canine stretch and getting onto his four feet. He pattered to his master, glancing back as if beckoning Shade to come over as well.

So he did. Sometimes it was best not to question impossible happenings too deeply, especially knowing that most of the outlandish things the bastard Asaph had told him and his brothers had turned out to be true.

"Here's the deal," Ken said, looting through the contents of the chest while Shade hovered over him. "I'm not here to guide you or tell you what to do. Just to help you along your journey, maybe point you in the right direction."

"Understood," Shade answered, though of course he didn't.

"Awesome. So, first thing's first. Your Shotstrate 1250 over there is useless without ammo. And you're not gonna find any of it where you're going. So here." He lifted a stack of six boxes, pivoted on his knees, and offered them up. Shade took the heavy stack. "9MM-50CT" had been printed on each of the boxes. He braced the stack on his forearm and slid free a sleeve. The brass heads of fifty pristine bullets pointed up at him. He whistled between his teeth, shoved the sleeve back in, and placed the stack down on the table, too shocked to say thank you.

"Oh, then there's these," Ken said, tossing over a spare burner cylinder and a shoulder holster, both of which Shade instinctively caught. "There's also this, and this, and these. Whichever way you go

with this, they'll be important. Even your accelerated healing won't fix you if you lose fingers and toes to frostbite."

Ken piled a heap of clothes on the floor. Heavy undergarments, a scarf, thick gloves, a sweater, a new pair of wool-lined boots—everything he would need to survive out in the elements.

Lastly, Ken lifted out a length of wrapped fabric. "And here's the most important part," he said, peeling the bundle open to reveal a foot-long golden cylinder with notches cut all along its length.

"What is it?" Shade asked.

Ken shrugged. "Dunno. And that's not an 'I can't tell you' type thing. I just...really don't know anything about it other than it's some sort of artifact and you're supposed to take with you."

Shade took the rod from him, then ran the pad of his thumb along the notches. "Why?"

"Like I said, I dunno. Guess you just gotta take it on faith that when you need it, you'll know what it's for."

Shade frowned. Faith was one thing he seemed to have a limited supply of lately.

"And...that's about it," Ken said. He slammed the lid of the chest, used it to help him stand. "And as much as it hurts to say, that's almost the end of our, um, friendship."

"Why is that?"

"Because you gotta go. This mountain's gonna get hit with a massive storm just after the sun sets tonight. So if you wanna make good time going wherever it is you're going, you're gonna have to leave in five hours at most."

Shade glanced toward one of the windows. The sun shone brightly, turning the snowflakes into sparkling crystals as they blew past the glass. The pull of forward momentum gripped him. Whether Ken was telling him the truth or just trying to get rid of him, he knew he had to leave soon.

A hand fell on his shoulder. "My man," Ken said, smiling. "Before you go, let's eat."

It was midday when Shade stepped out of the cabin, bundled up against the cold, with a loaded burner holstered beneath his

armpit and a belly full of something that Ken called “caribou stew.” Excitement made his muscles twitch. For the first time in a long while, he felt something akin to optimism. Someone or something out there was watching out for him. Ken and Silas had proved it.

“Shade, one more thing,” Ken said. The man stepped toward him, one hand held behind his back.

“What’s up?” Shade asked.

“I know you lost your hat. Figured you might like a new one, and I think this’ll suit you.”

He whipped out his hand, which held something that looked similar to Shade’s beloved wide-brim hat. This one was deep brown, with one side of the brim folded up to create an asymmetrical appearance. It was certainly handsome, and he grinned beneath his scarf as he placed it atop his head and adjusted the stampede string below his chin so it wouldn’t fall off.

“It’s called a slouch,” Ken said, grinning. “Australian. Looks good on you.”

As if to back up his master’s words, Silas barked from the doorway.

“Thanks, both of you,” Shade said, holding out a hand that Ken shook. “Your help was much appreciated, whether it was preordained by some higher power or not.”

“Even then, I think it has meaning,” the man answered. “After all, it’s always possible that deities are a lot like you. Always going forward but trapped in the past, looking for a way to either rediscover or avenge a lost love.”

Vera’s face swam into his vision. “Maybe so, my friend. Maybe so.”

Shade turned to the oppressive white world before him. The cabin rested on a peak so high that clouds obscured the downward slopes below. He started in the direction Ken had pointed him toward, only to stop when his new friend called out one last time.

“Got some parting words,” Ken said, kneeling beside Silas and stroking his fur. “A great man once said, ‘Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself.’”

Those words struck Shade as if he had heard them before, and he screwed up his face. "Why would you tell me that?"

"Just something to keep in mind, dude," Ken said. "Now get outta here before you get stuck out in the cold with nowhere to go. And if you ever find yourself in my neck of the proverbial woods again, don't try to find me. I'll find you."

Ken punctuated his remark with a wink. He gave Shade a wave, and then he and Silas disappeared into the cabin. Shade shrugged, adjusted the pack of gear on his back, and went on his way down the steep mountain trail.

The going was difficult but endurable, and he made excellent time. The trail led through natural gullies and trenches that could become avenues for massive snow drifts if he were to get trapped in a storm, which made him thankful for Ken's warning. He walked for a long time, as day passed into night, and took shelter in a hanging crag when the trailing storm finally caught up. At night, he curled up in his borrowed blankets and fell asleep easily, despite the storm raging only a few feet away.

Just after sunrise the next day, the air began to warm. Shade stripped off his extra layers. Sweat beaded on his brow. His surroundings gradually changed. Tufts of grass sprouted from gaps in snow-dappled rocks, and a few mountain vermin showed their faces—the first life other than Ken and Silas he had encountered since leaving the forest of Lemsburg behind.

Small trees began to pepper the landscape, growing larger the farther down the mountain he trekked. Eventually, they grew tall enough to create a canopy overhead where birds sang, critters scurried, and insects chirped.

A forest on the other side of the world. He had to laugh.

When the sun emerged fully from behind the mountains, he came upon a break in the trees to his right. The view was breathtaking—a sea of lush, endless green that sloped downward from the cliff face where he stood, ending at a wide valley of still more green. There were buildings down there, too far away for him to make out clearly. But closer to him was something that caught his attention even more:

a white spire breached the top of the trees, beckoning him onward. It oddly resembled the spire at the top of the Scourger's temple of worship, only this one had a star at the top instead of a cross.

*Civilization.*

Shade removed the rest of his heavy clothing and packed them away, continuing his journey wearing nothing but the clothes he'd started with. He walked easily, a growing sense of cautious excitement brewing within him as the sounds of nature grew louder.

The steep pitch of the land gradually lessened until Shade was treading easily on flat ground. The path curved, and around the bend he came upon a signpost on the side of the path that made him stop short. The sign was as tall as he was and made out of a thick, five-foot wide plank. He considered the words written on it in blocky, accusatory script:

*Darkenwood*

*Only the Righteous May Enter*

He continued briskly along the dirt path, his guard up, ready to dash into the woods at the first sign of trouble. But nothing jumped out at him; nothing blocked his way. His only companions were the insects and whatever scurrying creatures called the suddenly hot woods home.

After another slight downward slope, an unnatural spot of color drew his eye through a slight gap in the foliage. Shade halted and stooped down, shoving aside a low-hanging evergreen branch. It didn't reveal much, as the forest was dense and the trees formed a spidery maze over ground covered with vines and brambles, but he could tell by the way the sun shone down in a huge bright splotch that there was a clearing on the other side.

Shade tilted his head to the left and stared down the path. "Who knows where that leads?" he whispered with a shrug.

He squeezed through the tightly-packed woods, his face constantly whipped by branches and his duster snagged by hundreds of thorns. By the time he emerged into the clearing, he felt like a victim of an elderly woman he and his brothers had encountered a few years back. Living just outside Sal Railen, she had a penchant for poisoning

thieves, binding them, and then subjecting them to death by a thousand cuts from a homemade razor.

What he saw before him now stole away the whimsical memory of listening to the old woman's stubborn insistence that she'd been in the right. He stared at the large, rectangular building before him, its windowless exterior walls painted such a vivid shade of purple that Shade had a hard time looking at it directly. Given the white spire that rose from the roof, this was certainly the same place of worship he'd seen on his way down the mountain.

Intrigued, he held his breath and listened. A dull *thud* sounded from somewhere off in the distance, but other than that, all he heard was the scurrying of tiny paws over dead foliage and leaves rustling in the slight breeze. He crept around the left side of the structure, marveling how pristine the grounds were. The grass was lush and green and kept short, as if an army of goats trimmed it every day. A fifteen-foot-tall hedgerow, itself maintained to blocky precision, obstructed his view of the forest to the left. The hedgerow created a border that wasn't strictly impassable, but was restricting nonetheless, stretching to the front courtyard Shade approached and taking a hard ninety-degree turn. He imagined the same obstructive shrubbery would be mirrored on the other side of the structure, bordering it on three sides, with unfettered woods behind.

*These people like their privacy,* he thought.

Shade had reached the front corner of the building when creaking hinges whined through the humid early-morning air. He leapt to the side, pressed his back against the wall, and waited for a parade of worshippers to storm out. Only instead of numerous footfalls, he heard what sounded like a single pair of heavily booted feet.

Shade reckoned that as many people frequented this place as the various temples dedicated to the Pentus that had been erected throughout the wasteland. In other words, not many.

Peeking around the corner, he watched a man with pale, milky-white skin and wearing a pair of thick trousers, stumble down the concrete front steps of the temple, his footsteps clacking. Shade kept as still as he could as he watched the man totter and sway onto the

walkway at the base of the stairs. He had a wild look about him, his body language bringing to mind a man named Bishop, whom Shade and his brothers had met in Pennonstaff. Bishop had suffered a debilitating stroke, and his staggering gait as he tried to teach himself to walk again was mirrored by the man who staggered toward a gap in the hedgerow.

Only that wasn't truly correct, because there was something else wrong with this man that Shade couldn't quite understand. The knight stepped away from the wall for a better look, and his mouth screwed up in confusion. It was the man's legs. They were all wrong, bending at an awkward backward angle, as if they'd been broken at the knees. After inching a little closer, Shade realized the man wasn't wearing trousers; his muscular legs were covered in fur from his lower back on down to his feet—which weren't feet at all, but thick black hooves.

This doddering stranger had the lower body of a goat.

"Impossible," Shade whispered. He stepped into the open when the not-man exited the temple grounds, gazing at the trail between the hedgerows that led through the woods. The man was still visible, wobbling along the path, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly.

Baffled and growing concerned, Shade turned to consider the front of the temple. From what he could tell, it had a single way in—an oaken door festooned with carved symbols. The billboard above the door read, "Tro Choi." He wondered what god these people prayed to. He wondered if they were friendly.

The sign stating *Only the Righteous May Enter* that he had seen along the path through the woods entered his thoughts. He questioned for a moment if the sign was an invitation or a warning. Would the people who called this place home find him righteous? Would they have any of the answers he sought? Were any of them human, or were they all mishmashed creatures like the one who had just exited the temple?

At that moment, he realized it didn't matter.

He followed the stumbling half-man's path through the gap in the hedgerow, walking into the unknown with his head held high and a hand on his gun.