

THE FOURTH TIER

BOOK ONE OF THE UNDERWORLD SERIES



THE LIFE AWAITING YOU AFTER YOU DIE

*Penn
Fawn*
Books

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Chapter I – They Are Coming

Demba and the fellow he considered his best friend, a certain Shae, sat under a nearly cloudless sky. It was a magnificent shade of blue juxtaposed to a complementary earthen toned brown stretched out on the horizon.

That latter hue was all around them. It was the color of the semi-arid landscape, the color of the mud they mixed with water and compacted to make what would become bricks after baking the things in the sun.

Around a hundred and twenty years or so ago, they and their brethren used those bricks to build the walls of the homes and most of the other buildings within Kaz, their hometown dubbed the city under the stars.

It was located about eight hundred yards away from the side of the majestic stretch of mountains to its east, the Central Range. From base to tip, the stretch behind the city was around four hundred feet tall.

Kaz was self-sufficient and had to be.

If there were neighbors with whom its residents could have bartered or considered allies, the Kazites knew nothing about them.

To say one had to try and make it on his own was a given in a world where men knew very little about geography, and proximity to their fellow men was not common.

Demba was on his verandah, under its shady roof.

His home was among one of those near the city's western periphery.

"Such a pleasant day, isn't it?" he said.

"Times ten," Shae replied.

Demba smiled. "It's good to know there are some things we can enjoy," he said.

"I guess so."

"You guess? What's to guess at?"

"Mm. Nothing."

Demba, with his mouth ajar, looked at his shaman friend.

He too was a shaman.

"Despite the sun being out and there hardly being a cloud overhead, it's not too warm, and the wind feels pleasant against one's skin," he said.

"It does."

"So again, nothing there to guess at," Demba maintained.

Shae gave what he said more consideration.

"And, well . . . this may seem a bit of a stretch but, maybe the terrible dreams we've been having of late aren't visions at all. Maybe they're all for nothing."

"I hope so, but I don't suppose it's too much to hope for more," he harped on the most common complaint or longing of the city's residents. "I'm not alone in feeling this way."

"No. Of course not," Demba, who sensed he knew what was coming, replied.

He, after all, had only heard what he suspected he might mention time and time again for what began to feel like forever. The truth is, he'd been hearing such talk for a mere twelve decades or so, give or take a few years.

Shae became pensive.

Demba took note and thought it was best to allow him a moment.

"This life," Shae broke the silence, "or existence, or whatever you care to call it, it's a terrible, terrible curse."

"Yes, but what can one do?"

"Well, that's the question we'd all love to have answered. Isn't it?"

Demba did not reply.

"I wish I knew the answer," Shae continued.

A period of silence ensued.

Demba combed his mind. "I remember when none of this was here," he began. "When we more or less spoke these very words."

"That was a very long time ago."

"Yes, and nothing much has changed."

"Oh, plenty has changed, Shae. How can you say that? There was nothing here. No Kaz, no city. There was nothing here but sand and stone. We, the fallen turned Kazites, made something out of nothing. We began a process of reinventing ourselves."

"I guess you can say that," Shae replied.

"So, why can't we do it again?"

Shae considered what he said.

"There is so much we take for granted, but have you ever stopped to consider how miraculous those simple things are that we take for granted? I mean things both here and from where we came."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about discovering how to manipulate and make use of what has always been all around us. The natural elements. Have you ever thought about how many simple day-to-day things there are all around you that never were, things we created, gave birth to, so to speak, and gave names?"

Shae did not answer.

"Everything from our blades and weapons, to the tools or utensils we use. Simple things, like the clothing on our backs."

Shae thought about it now.

"Man pondered about these things, gave them deep thought and consideration, and came up with an answer, a solution to our problems, our interests, needs, or wants. I don't see why our present situation should be any different. Necessity is the mother of invention."

"Yes, but we're not talking about some straight-forward matter here. How many more years do we need before we figure it out? A hundred was not enough. So, do we need two more? Three, perhaps? Four? Our experience has long gone beyond feeling like some form of torture."

Demba was silent.

"All of what you say sounds good and applies under normal circumstances, normal conditions, but the simple fact is, life here is still not what we knew. It's not even close. And, you can't tell me you've adapted or are satisfied with things as they are."

"No, but we've made great strides."

"We?" Shae interjected.

Demba looked at him. He sensed his words had the making of a rant he wanted to continue.

“Can you, in all honesty, tell me you’re satisfied with the strides we’ve made?”

“Well, I’m not completely . . .”

“You don’t say,” Shae cut him short. “Shocking words if I’ve ever heard them,” he sarcastically added.

“To not need sustenance, Demba? To thrive on eating nothing, nothing at all for not days or weeks, but years, decades on end, yet we never suffer any ill effects is not a normal thing. Now is it?” Shae asked.

“No.”

“The rules, or if you will, laws here, are bent in a terrible, terrible way.”

“Not all of them.”

“Enough are, or the ones that matter. Those we desperately wished weren’t askew are. I needn’t remind you because it’s impossible to not notice this.”

Demba kept quiet.

“You know as well as anyone because it’s impossible to not know what the laws . . .” he cut himself short, then paused. “No, the curses, let’s be frank now. You know as well as anyone what those affecting us the most are. You know they disable our ability to experience any kind of real pleasure.”

Demba could not deny it.

“The day is a pleasant one, yes, but a man desires more,” Shae added.

Demba’s Adam’s apple moved despite his friend telling him nothing new. His grievances were the topic at Kaz and everywhere within the underworld that never died. For those most aggrieved, which was near everyone, they never grew old.

“To not be able to eat or drink but never suffer for want of nutrition, Demba? To never grow thin and frail, to never grow old or die on account of it? To never be able to die period, lest one dares to fall upon his sword?” he emphatically added.

Demba listened.

“To never be able to eat and digest a piece of fruit or enjoy a draught of wine or consume anything, anything at all? To feel or have a desire but never be able to love, Demba? And, as I have already mentioned, to be all but denied an escape from this misery, so our suffering is what? Everlasting? How is that not something that will continue to be a source of not never-ending worry, but torment?”

“What I am saying is, given enough time, all you mentioned there can also be rectified.”

“Enough time, eh? Again, I wonder how long it might be before a day passes when I don’t suffer terribly. Hardly a week passes in which I didn’t wish when I went to bed, I would die. One never passes in which I wished I never awoke to once again see the light of day, or darkness of night, or anything under these accursed skies.

“All of this beauty does nothing but mask deception. It is a façade, but one look behind closed doors reveals all that’s here is a nightmare. One with no end unless you can find the courage to take your life.”

Demba fell silent again.

“That is the only way in which you can get some relief, but I must add, it terrifies . . . Nay, it near tortures me to madness to consider whether even that is the key to finally finding some rest.”

“Forbid it!” Demba said.

Shae looked into his eyes.

“If given enough time, there has to be some way out of this situation. I have to think we will find it. Please God.”

“Please God, eh? You’ve been spending too much time with that dreamer, the would-be prophet, Sadu. Be careful that before long you don’t find yourself embroiled in a cult.”

“There is nothing cultist in feeling the way I do.”

“Gather enough of you together, and there is more than enough potential for it. It all starts in your minds, with whatever you believe. A belief and a truth is not the same thing, mind you.”

“That much, I mean the last of what you said there is fair.”

“Is it ever? Please God, eh? Meaning you hope we will find some kind of salvation.”

“I do.”

“Well, again, hope is one thing, but do you believe you will find what you so desire?”

Demba allowed himself a couple of seconds to consider his question.

“It begins with hope, Shae.”

“I am always or often hopeful, but hope is or never has been a guarantee of anything. If I am honest, none of the things I hoped for have ever come my way, Demba. I mean, really hoped for. Not one! Not in this world or the one from which we have fallen.

“I suppose, like most men, what I hoped for above all else was a life that allowed me to thrive in modest comfort with a proper sense of security. I was never greedy or extravagant. I never desired or lusted after wealth or riches.

“All that I cared for was to live peaceably with modest means. A decent roof over my head, and enough so I could comfortably support myself and my family. All I wanted was to not have to fret or worry too much when the day came.

“That’s all. But, of course, despite my best efforts, it never happened, so for all of my hopes and dreams, I never got what I wanted most. On the contrary.”

Demba felt moved, for some of the best storytellers are those who mention what you already know or have experienced.

“My life was filled with never-ending concern. This is why I so often sought some kind of escape by chewing khat, or heartily consuming spirituous liquors and the like. This, despite my knowing many were so much worse off than I.

“But ah, whatever. My story is nothing new. It is as old as time itself, as common as grains of sand on a seashore. And, now I have this life that is another animal entirely. A horse of a different color, so to speak.”

“Yes, but one has to have faith, Shae.”

“Ah, faith. There we go, another one of those words.”

“Shae, I have to believe we will one day be able to eat and drink again, be able to eat and drink well, be able to love, to feel no fear about the prospect or potential for it to go wrong provided we are open to those prospects.

“There must be some place in this world where that is possible. One has to open one’s mind to thinking like this. At least that is what I believe.”

“Belief! There you go. There is another one of those words.”

“Damn it, Shae. One has to believe in something.”

“In what? Miracles? In your God? A lot of good that or He has gotten you. You and all of those fools bent on spreading this lie, this particular fantasy some of you appear to have become obsessed with.

“To hell with your God! If He were real, I wish to make it clear, I feel honored to curse his bastard name. I would gladly drag him down to and through the very bowels of hell, which may very well be right here where we stand!”

“Shae!”

“I mean it! What God would allow a man to go through this? Enough with your talk about Him already. There is no God! To hear the mention of that name disgusts me. It is all lies and fantasy.

“Here or there we all were, suffering like dogs, and for what? Only to see our health fade then suffer more under the pangs of fear from impending death, which as it turned out, is but the beginning of our misery, yet you call on the name of this impotent redeemer?”

“My word, Shae. I never knew you were beyond hope.”

“Maybe I am. Maybe not. Believe whatever you wish, but what is there to have me believe we’re not all beyond hope and redemption?”

“I refuse to believe that. There has to be a way.”

“Yes? Well, if there is a heaven and that is indeed your little imaginary friend’s abode, I wish to see its downfall as much as I’ve lived to see mine.”

“If you meant to alarm me, Shae, you’ve succeeded.”

“Good.”

“I never knew you were so far gone.”

“Now you know.”

Demba said nothing more.

“If I am to make anything of myself, to have half a chance at a better life, it will be by my own doing. I am my own God and master, and so are you and all men. Any hope for a brighter future lies in our hands or by the laws nature will allow. Not by any myth or fairytale.”

“Very well, Shae.”

“You’ve seen the nature of this place. It is brutal. One can only hope death should be so kind as to one day welcome us so there will be no future horror to follow.”

“So negative, so morbid.”

“So honest, so truthful!”

“So, is that what you want?”

“Me? Want? Like all men, the irony is I fear it! I fear death, although it is the most beautiful and loving bride there ever was and will be,” Shae emphatically replied. “I fear her dark and cold touch, yet still I hope for a day of rest.

“It is madness. Here I am, caught between these two worlds. We all are. We are lost in this place of limbo where hope appears to be little more than a prescription for prolonging our misfortune.”

“I see now that I must pray for you, pray very deeply.”

“If you wish to waste your time, go ahead, my brother. Words from a soul lost out in the wilderness reaches no one. Certainly, it can reach no figment of one’s imagination. The truth is, we are all lost and trying to make the best of a situation. That is all.”

“That does not mean things cannot improve.”

“No. Of course not. Given the larger picture, one may always be granted a break or two, but no one can deny we’re in for a very unpleasant and prolonged affair. Saying so is the understatement of the year.”

“Things will get better. They have to.”

“Okay. How’s this? I hope so, but the truth is they seldom ever do.”

Chapter II – Sound The Alarm

Demba concluded his peer was not in a good mood.

He chalked it up to mounting frustration over what he acknowledged was their trying situation.

Over the years, many of their brethren found courage others could not and took their lives. Death by one's hand was common. On average, about twenty-six Kazites did so every day.

Although Demba did not know what the exact numbers were, he knew it happened regularly. Notwithstanding, he felt Shae was hardly so bitter as he made himself appear that day.

He was no iconoclast or an intolerant atheist, or so he believed.

The sound of a horn being blown jolted him from reflecting.

The two looked at each other.

The faint sound of a second horn being blown in the distance reached them, then another.

Demba's Adam's apple moved.

"Great," Shae bitterly said. "Now what?"

Demba, who could only wonder what it meant, did not answer.

He knew one thing was for sure, hearing the sound meant nothing good.

It was a distress call meant for use only if there was suspected impending danger.

Shae turned away from him.

He hastily headed out toward the street.

Demba was hot on his heels.

Shae swung his head to the left, then right. His eyes were wide open as he looked about wildly.

Already, people were pouring out of their homes onto the dirt roads.

"Look!" Demba said.

Shae cast his eyes in the direction toward which he was pointing.

His face grew long.

"What is it?" Demba asked.

"I don't know," Shae replied, wincing, trying desperately to make sense of what it was in the distance, and come to terms with why the horn was sounded.

Yonder, figures that appeared to be a fraction of an inch approached. Lots of them.

"I can't be sure other than to say it looks like we're going to have company," he replied.

"What kind of company?" Demba asked.

"You're asking me? You have as much information as I do, Demba. I was with you all this time, wasn't I?"

Demba didn't reply.

"I'm not the one who found out about this and sounded the alarm," Shae said, looking into his eyes.

Demba redirected his attention to what was taking place in the distance.

“Maybe it’s a herd of some type of beast or the other. Perhaps wildebeest.”

“I doubt it. After all the time spent here, we would have seen something like this, not once, but with regularity. What you said would make sense if the direction in which they are headed is along a migratory path.”

Demba did not reply.

“No. I’m afraid not, my friend,” Shae added. “This is something else.”

“Perhaps there is a drought somewhere and the beasts are seeking an alternative path toward where they can find water.”

“If what you say is true, that doesn’t spell any good for us. It means they would most likely be attracted to our streams.”

Demba’s Adam’s apple moved. “Right,” he said.

A woman who lived just a couple of houses away rapidly approached them. Another fellow did the same, then another.

They heard the sound of shuffling feet and turned around.

“Good morning,” the woman said.

She was Hespacia of the Witch’s Circle, which had a membership of six.

They were six, as it turned out, of the most desired women in Kaz, if not all of the underworld.

Where nature, true to its selective name, furnished other women with plain to at best average to moderately attractive attributes, it endowed the witches with uncommon beauty of intolerably lascivious and salacious appeal, not to mention their other talents—talents those who often craved for carnal delights could only dream they had.

What the witches discovered and failed to keep secret was they were the only women there who could relish a man carnally and vice versa.

Neither gender would suffer under pangs of mind-bending intolerable agony after a mere few seconds of entanglement.

“Good morning, you say? I’m praying, to take a word from your vocabulary, Demba, that it will be,” Shae replied.

“Good morning,” Demba said.

Their two neighbors caught up to them.

“What do you think it is?” one asked. This was Sadu.

“I have no idea,” Demba replied.

“Good day, all,” the other neighbor, a certain Pilal said, joining them, plus all of their peers who’d come out of their homes.

They all looked toward the horizon.

“Good day to you,” Hespacia replied. She then redirected her attention to the goings-on.

Shae noticed she appeared concerned.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I don’t know what to think,” she said.

He wondered what he should say to her next. “The expression on your face says a lot,” he added.

“Does it?”

“Yes. What I see there is the look of someone very concerned.”

She did not reply.

“Maybe I’m a charlatan and maybe you so-called witches are too, but if I’m to believe what they say about your kind, your intuition is at least as attuned as mine.”

“What have you heard said?”

“What does your heart tell you? What are you feeling?”

“Nothing good. It’s all negative energy.”

“Demba and I have felt that for some time now.”

She shook her head up, then down.

“Any visions?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Bad dreams.”

“What did you see?”

“Dark things, the likes of nothing I ever saw in this world or the one from which we’ve come.”

“Such as?”

“A world that appeared almost surreal, one populated by the living dead and other ghastly things. Your God was nowhere to be found, Demba,” he said, turning to face him.

“We’ve already discussed this,” his friend replied.

“But, you hope to inject Him into the mix?”

Demba did not answer.

“Thrice, I awoke from my sleep covered in sweat. It was from a continuation of the same dream. That much I recall but not much more.”

Hespatia shook her head up, then down again.

Slowly but surely, the figures in the distance appeared to grow.

“They’re elephants,” Pilal, the fellow with a swarthy complexion, said.

His was a good three shades darker, if such a thing could be measured, than Demba, Shae, Hespatia, and most of his peers, who had a tan hue.

Theirs, and those at Kaz in general, was the lightest tan. It was a lovely shade of a very fine brown, which, had it been any lighter, might have appeared a tad yellow.

This was not due to prolonged exposure to the sun, mind you. It was their natural, for lack of a better description, hue.

“Yes,” Pilal’s dear friend Sadu, who, like him, was an Indian man, replied.

Also, like Pilal, his cropped shoulder-length hair was as straight as could be and as black as the night.

“Lots of them,” Pilal added.

“And, they are not alone. They come with men on their backs,” Sadu added.

“Right,” Hespatia said, barely audibly.

Shae took note. “I wonder what drew them this way.”

“Don’t we all,” Demba replied.

“Before long we’ll find out,” Pilal said.

Demba turned on his heel and was about to walk away.

“Where are you off to?” Shae asked.

“To get my sword and bow, which is what I should have done the minute I heard the horn,” he replied. “You do recall should we hear it outside of a call for an important meeting that means something specific, right?”

Shae looked him squarely in the face. “Yes. How could I forget that?”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“Okay.”

“We don’t know who these people are, whether they’re a would-be friend or enemy. I suggest you do what I’m about to,” Demba said.

“Let’s do it,” Shae replied. “You don’t have to say it twice.”

They raced toward their homes.

Shae did so with his next-door neighbor's last remark weighing heavily on his mind.

His words amplified what he was sure all who'd gathered were thinking. Who were these people? Where were they from? Were they friendly or not?

The latter possibility concerned him the most.

If they were hostile, he was not sure how he'd manage that.

He and the Kazites had been through many mock scenarios in the event they ever had to defend themselves against a show of open hostility. He acknowledged, however, facing a make-believe situation versus the real thing was so very different. Mental taxations like fear, doubt, and other concerns were all happily absent in the make-believe case.

He returned to where Hespacia and the others were gathered.

Demba was already there.

All wore concerned faces.

Pilal took note. "You know, despite your bad dreams and all, you could be wrong. After all, they're dreams."

"Did I say anything different?" Shae asked, looking him in the eye.

"No," Pilal replied.

"It's your life. You can do whatever you want. I never claimed to be your advisor," Shae added with an edge in his voice.

Pilal did not reply.

Shae directed his attention to the developments.

Things were much clearer now.

The largest herd of elephants he ever saw—he imagined, and rightly so, that there must have been thousands of them—all with a rider atop each one, drew nearer.

He redirected his attention to Demba. "I've seen enough," he said. "I'm pulling back."

"Pulling back? Back where?" his best friend asked in alarm.

"Nearer to the cave."

At the base of the mountain that loomed over Kaz was the cave in question.

"What? You'd dare go in there?" Demba asked with widened eyes.

"If my life depended on it. Yes."

"Yeah? Given the bad vibe you admitted you get merely from looking at it, you and just about everyone else who laid eyes on it? In over one hundred years, no one who saw it dared set foot within the so-called mouth of the devil."

"Not true."

"Scarcely anyone did. Just a handful that I know of, of which three got lost and were never heard from again. You know the story. Inside there is uncharted territory. The unknown."

"Any decision to venture into it would not be for adventure, Demba. It would be a last desperate measure to try and save one's skin."

"Or, run headlong into a dark pit of doom," Demba replied. "Maybe that is what those approaching are here for, to drive us into it!"

"Conjecture," Sadu interjected. "All conjecture. We don't know if anything you've said is true."

"Look, you can do whatever you wish. I'm pulling back to be closer to the mouth of the cave in the event of an emergency. You don't have to follow me."

His peers looked at him, then at each other, then at him.

"You look at me like I'm a four-headed demon. Do you not see what is heading our way? Would you gamble that these people are friendly?"

"What if they are?"

“What if they aren’t?”

“Do you run and leave your house at the first sight of an approaching stranger? What kind of man does that?”

“If you ask me, machismo or honor does not apply here. Common sense does. Do you think you’re prepared to resist these strangers?”

Sadu was slow to respond. “Perhaps,” he said.

“You’re not!” Shae emphatically replied.

His tone shocked Sadu into silence.

“What’s more is I get the feeling these people know what they’re about. I can’t say the same for us.”

No one offered to reply.

“Maybe your God will help you,” Shae added. “Your God who’s never around for anything. Or, maybe you have some other to heed your call.”

Sadu said nothing further.

Shae looked around. “I don’t care what any of you think of me,” he said. “Call me a charlatan or whatever. I’m going with my gut feeling, my intuition. I’m pulling back,” he added.

There was a stone-cold look on his face.

He turned on his heel and made to depart.

“I’ll go with you,” he heard a voice he immediately recognized.

He turned around.

“So, let’s go,” he said to Demba.

“I’ll go too,” Hespacia said.

Sadu looked at her with his mouth ajar.

“It’s a precautionary measure, Sadu,” she said. “You don’t want to be among the last scurrying to take cover if this little meeting takes a turn for the worst, do you?”

Sadu did not reply.

Hespacia, Demba, and Shae walked away from him.

He and Pilal stood looking at each other.

“What?” Sadu said.

Pilal did not answer. Instead, he turned away from him and headed in the direction in which the others were going.

Sadu followed him.

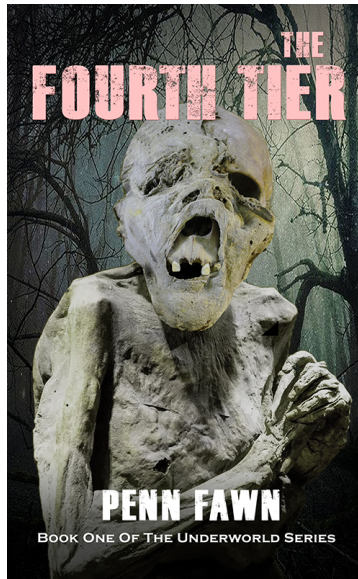
After taking a few steps, he turned around and had a look at what was taking place behind him.

The beasts and those on their backs drew ever closer.

The sight unnerved him.

He turned his back to it and proceeded to follow Pilal.

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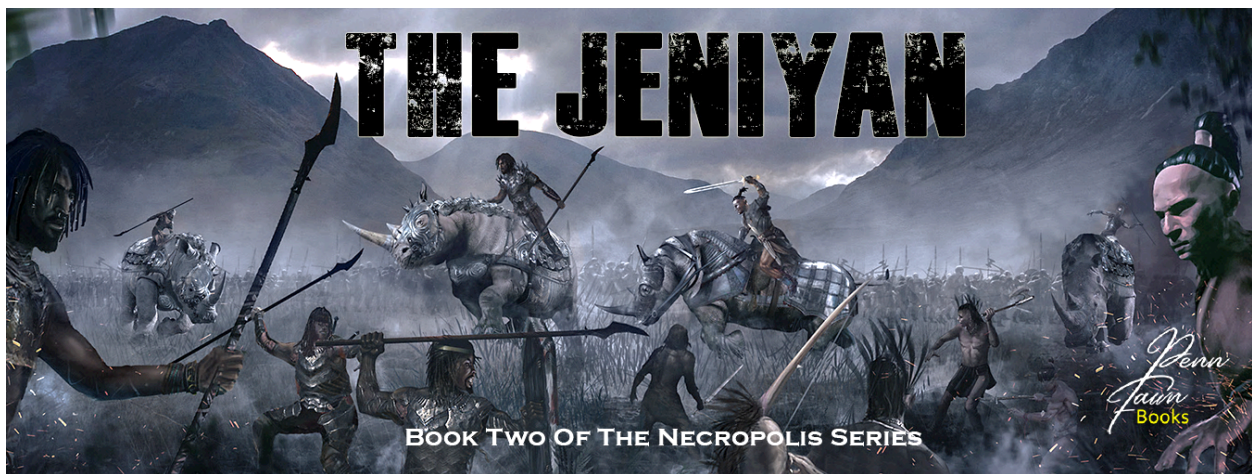
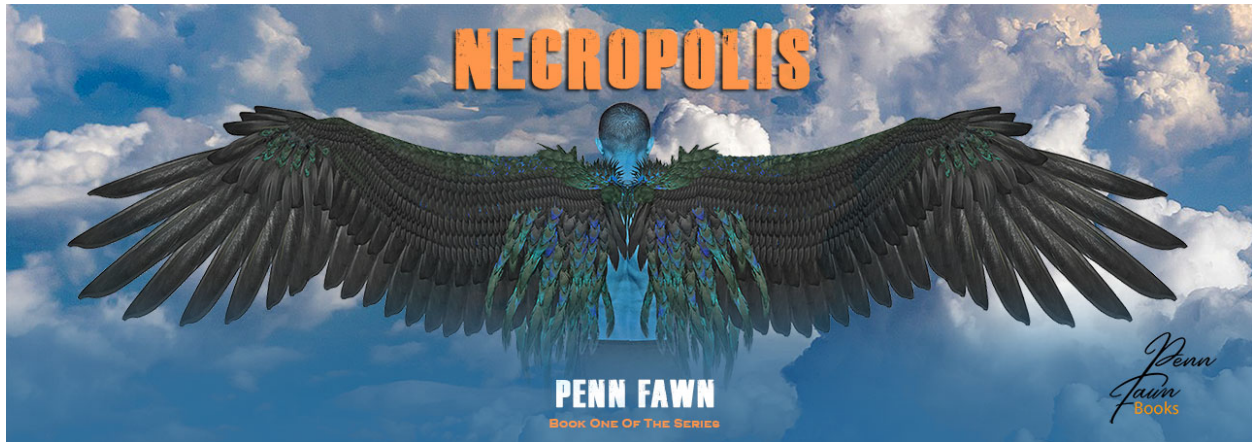
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