

Sentinel
City of Destiny

Landel Bilbrey

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“Hear, my son,
and receive my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many.
I have taught you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in right paths...
Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go;
Keep her, for she is your life...
... the path of the just is like the shining sun,
that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble...
Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth,
And put perverse lips far from you.
Let your eyes look straight ahead,
And your eyelids look right before you.
Ponder the path of your feet,
And let all your ways be established.
Do not turn to the right or the left;
Remove your foot from evil.

Solomon,
King of Israel
970-930 BC

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TABLE OF WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

One Hand = Three Inches
One Thumb = One Inch
One Step or Pace = Three Feet
Stones Throw = One Hundred Feet
One Full Moon = One Month
One Season = Three Months
One Day = Twenty-Four Hours
One Summer = One Year
One Sack of Corn = One Hundred Pounds

SEASONS OF TIME

Season of Birth = Spring
Season of Warmth = Summer
Season of Change = Fall
Season of Ice = Winter

Chapter 1 The Offering

“Again, he led Paladin to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will serve me.’” Logos 40:4:8

It was the Season of Change. The firefan trees were morphing into a puzzle of reds and yellows. Towering high above the shorter trees stood rows of majestic tabors keeping watch like faithful soldiers over the peaceful forest below. The giant old trees made Jerol feel like an ant in the grass. Fortunately, down on the ground, the trail was not as overgrown as those he had traveled since leaving his hometown of Gelandesprung.

Layers of leaves had piled up during many Seasons of Change carpeting the way. The moist, spongy mulch made a welcomed cushion for each step. Traveling here would be much easier.

Jerol followed the forest maze until walking out into a wide clearing. Across the gap stood a tall, ivy-covered wall. He could hardly believe his eyes! The grand, old Wall of Devoir stood guarding the object of his quest—Sentinel, the ancient city of destiny. Soon he would be welcomed as a brother into manhood’s hallowed court. Dusk had arrived and he needed to find his way to the other side before nightfall.

Jerol would need to mind his steps, for the Enemy was ruthless and had placed many trap doors along the wall. He was determined not to fall for the adversary’s cunning tricks. He leaned back and with his eyes began searching the weatherworn wall, looking for clues to where the single, true gate might be hidden.

The wall’s surface was uneven and coarse, draped with dark green ivy and a strange, web-like moss. Spreading out to his left and right, a wide strip of clearing lay between the tree line and the wall. Jerol turned to his left and headed north where the wall traversed up, and along the edge of a rugged cliff.

The darkness of night was steadily descending like a heavy curtain. There was no moon, and seeing was becoming increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, he followed the wall’s perimeter up hill until coming to a narrow brook gently flowing from underneath the wall’s foundation and near the top of the incline. The rippling stream ran down a gentle slope and then off the cliff in an arch of spray. Jerol decided to bed down for the night just outside the base of the wall. The only light was being provided by a large swarm of curious fire moths.

“Looks like a good place to make camp,” Jerol thought. So, he sat down to rest and began to stare at the flickering reflection of the friendly moths in a small pool of water about three steps downstream from the wall. “What an interesting place,” he told himself. “I hope my brother is already safe behind the wall. Mother and Father will be so proud of us. I can hardly wait to see what the city will be like.”

All of a sudden, a loud racket moving rapidly through the underbrush and somewhere beyond the cliff’s dark edge brought Jerol at once to his feet. He watched with concern as treetops, illuminated from below, violently shook from side to side. A strange light was moving at a furious pace directly to him. A radiant, glowing creature eventually emerged from the adjoining brush about sixty steps behind him to the south. The creature stood erect, dwarfing the trees beneath it. Its beauty was unlike anything he had ever seen before, and its unusual light lit the surrounding wall and countryside like a thousand blazing lamps.

The creature stood studying Jerol’s bulging eyes and then began to speak with a pleasing

voice. “Jerol, do not be afraid. I mean you no harm. I am Candor*, seraph of truth! I have heard of your great bravery and want you to lead my army. I am willing to offer you anything your heart desires. Just say the word, and I will make it so. I wish to be your friend.” He moved closer, and then paused. “I have also come to warn you; you have not been told the truth. Do not desire to sit on the King’s court, for if you do, you can expect only misery and suffering. Come, stay with me.” The angel’s smooth face looked serene and inviting. “Do you really believe the King’s promise of blessings? What does an old King know about a young boy like you? If he truly cares about you, then why does he allow you to suffer? Why would he make you struggle for so long to find this place?” The creature paused, leaning toward the tiny boy. “I know why. It is not hard to understand. The truth is, he really doesn’t care about you. He only cares about pushing you around for his amusement. Listen— today is a new day. If you will follow me, I promise to make you commander over my most seasoned warriors! Your foot will no longer have to touch the battlefield. Instead, you can send your warriors to fight in your place.”

Jerol stood speechless and confused. Prayer, who was circling and watching from high overhead, began screeching, wildly flapping his wings. The commotion snapped Jerol back to his senses.

“Whom should I believe?” he pondered. The angel’s generous offer had stirred doubt deep in his soul. “The journey has been hard. If the King were so loving, why did he allow me to suffer so much?” Jerol queried. “And ruling over an entire army would be a once in a lifetime opportunity.” He was feeling confused. The stranger seemed sincere enough. But still Jerol’s heart was telling him to be cautious. He searched within his soul for guidance from the Scrolls. “For the hallowed sword is quick and powerful, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Logos 58:4:12) “That’s it!” he thought.

Keeping his eyes transfixed on the creature, Jerol drew his weapon and slowly brought it into view. He eased the blade above his head with its flat side turned toward the seraph. The sword’s metallic surface began to throw and magnify the angel’s brilliant light. One light beam, then another, and yet another, until the area was saturated with a light even brighter than that of the creature!

Blinded by the light and stirring up a great cloud of dust, Candor quickly turned his head away and began slowly moving closer to Jerol. The cautious boy kept his eyes focused and moved with the approaching form keeping his sword between them. The brave boy blinked and squinted, struggling not to lose his bearings through the rapid flashes of blinding light and swirling dust.

As the light was reflected from the sword and onto the enormous seraph*, a bizarre and distinct shadow appeared behind him upon the cloud. To Jerol’s astonishment, its outline did not coincide with the shape of the lovely creature standing before him. Instead, he saw the shadow of an enormous dragon! Instantly, the creature’s disguise was foiled.

“I know who you are!” Jerol shouted, moving back and pointing his sword in the dragon’s direction. “You are the leader of the Shadow World!”

Realizing that Jerol could no longer be deceived, the blazing imposter dropped his clever disguise and transformed into its true self, mirroring the shadow in the distance. His face was long and grotesque with a mouth lined with long sharp spikes for teeth and a forked tongue as long as Jerol was tall. His body was a mass of muscles and sinew encased in a suit of scorched, rough, leathery skin. A thick putrid stench began to fill the air. Inexplicably, light seemed to be absorbed into the beast’s enormous body. The countryside behind the monster began to turn

pitch black.

The dragon threw back its head and howled with a hideous laugh that shook the jungle. “Little boy! You will never enter Sentinel! You are nothing more than a frightened little bug and certainly no match for me. I am Azrael, the immortal ruler of The Damned. I have been since the beginning. Just one flick of my finger can destroy thousands of your puny kind! What makes you think you will ever become a warrior, when you are still afraid of the dark? Run back home to your mother before it’s too late, little boy!”

And with that, the demon pointed a disgusting finger at Jerol, and then shouted into the woods, “Get him!” Jerol turned, wondering to whom Azrael was speaking. Sin had broken from the bushes near the wall and about thirty steps to his right, and was running at full speed straight at him! The devilish swine was mad and grunting with his head down low to the ground. Drool was dripping from his twisted mouth. Jerol watched in wonder as the beast began morphing into some other kind of creature with each step he took. He reared up; lifting his front legs from the ground and began running on his hind legs. His front hooves transformed into hands with long fingers and sharp claws. Jagged bat-like wings flexed and pulled free from his gristly back. Two bright red lights glowed from where his eyes used to be.

As Sin began whipping his wings, a bolt of black lightning shot into an old, dead tree to the left of Jerol. A shower of invisible sparks and smoking wood exploded out at the startled boy. Jerol raised his shield just in time to deflect the fragments. He could not see the sparks, but he felt their heat across his skin. Jerol readied his sword for action while he watched Azrael out of the corner of his eye.

When Sin got to within about twenty steps of Jerol, he was suddenly squashed to the ground! Prayer had been flying guard in the clouds and decided to intervene. The great bird had folded his mighty wings and fallen straight down, like a boulder, onto the back of the unsuspecting beast! Jerol reeled backward as the two titans tumbled on the ground. Screeching, Prayer clawed and grabbed between Sin’s rubbery wings. Sin started screaming back, exposing sharp tusks, and throwing his head from side to side trying desperately to stab Prayer’s chest.

After a couple of near misses, Prayer released the kicking fiend and bolted upward. Sin jumped to his feet, opened his mouth, and began spewing out pieces of flaming brimstone into the sky. The super-heated rocks riddled into the great bird, stopping him in midair. The blows were hard, forcing him back down to the ground. Sin pounced, lunging at his nemesis, but once again the agile bird dodged and catapulted straight up and in a blur, disappearing into the darkness of the night. The angry demon frantically searched the sky in every direction, but he could not see the bird anywhere. Then, BOOM! Prayer suddenly reappeared from the shadows and delivered a decisive blow to the back of Sin’s head. The stunned animal’s ugly face dug hard into the dirt. Prayer held on tightly to the bunched-up skin folds on the back of Sin’s neck, this time lifting him off the ground and high above the trees. The demon became so irate that he began to spit fire. He punched at the air with his powerful wings and legs, trying to break free, but his resistance was no use; Prayer was not letting go. Under great protest from Azrael, Prayer carried the screaming imp through the sky and out of sight.

The battle was over in a matter of moments. Jerol wasted no time in moving back to face Azrael, whose beady, red, glowing eyes were growing brighter. The ancient dragon began pacing from side to side. Jerol could hear his prehistoric bones crack with each step. Words from the Scrolls began to fill the boy’s thoughts. “Believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the Logos,

because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. After you have suffered a little while, you will be restored and made strong, firm and steadfast. Resist him, and he will flee” (Logos 59:1:6; 59:4:7; 60:5:8,9,10).

The cursing giant moved closer to him but then stopped, standing only steps away. Azrael quickly leaned forward, extended his neck and stretched opened his massive mouth. Instantly, jets of scalding steam exploded out from somewhere deep inside the demon. The air began to fill with a loud roar, like a large whirlwind, as blue hot flames and molten brimstone, heavier than lead, began spewing out at Jerol!

The Dark Lord knew that he had one last hope for eliminating the boy. So, he unleashed his entire arsenal of wickedness. Fire blew out in waves of every conceivable evil. This particular day Jerol had dressed in full armor. So, the young warrior crouched down behind his badly tattered shield and, with his right foot planted back, braced for the worst. Countless fragments of burning rock began riddling into him, jarring Jerol until he was numb. Even though the molten rock was capable of melting diamonds, somehow the tattered shield was able to deflect its searing heat! The air became thick with the smell of sulfur. If not for his faithful shield, Jerol would be consumed. The barrage of evil persisted for what seemed like days. When the assault had ended, all that was left of the demon’s display of hate was a pile of smoldering ashes and glowing embers. The onslaught had pounded Jerol down and onto his back. He was banged up and bruised, yet much alive. The fearless boy sprang back up and onto his feet.

In disgust the old dragon lifted his arms, grabbed at the sky and belched out another ear-bursting shriek! Jerol knew that the only thing left for Azrael to try was to seize him with his bare hands and rip him to shreds. While the Dark Lord stood distracted, Jerol saw an opening, a chance to prevail. Throwing down his glowing shield, he seized his sword, lifted the weapon behind his head and began running at Azrael as fast as he could. But just before coming to within striking range, his right foot snagged a root on the path. He grabbed at the air trying frantically to stop his fall but was thrown hard to the ground. He felt something smash against his head, and then everything went black.

Chapter 2 Bull's Eye

“Plan carefully and you will have plenty; if you act too quickly, you will never be satisfied.”
Logos 20:21:5

To this day I get chills when I think of how Jerol must have felt standing alone before Azrael*. I remember too well how I felt, as a young boy, backed into a corner so far that the only thing I could see was the demon's twisted face. Just like Jerol, I had almost made my way into Sentinel when the Enemy appeared and stood to oppose me. He threatened to destroy everything I had worked so hard to get. Only by the grace of good King Deus* am I still here today. Beware, my friend, for sooner or later the Old Dragon will come looking for you, and, if you want to sit at the King's table, you had better be ready.

That is why I want to tell you the rest of the story about Jerol and his brother's perilous quests for Sentinel, the City of Destiny. My hope is that you will learn from their experiences and avoid much trouble. Please pay close attention to their tale. I promise you that if you heed its timeless message, great shall be your reward.

My name is Lector*. I am a follower of the Light, and I live with my sweet wife, Charity*, in the world of Terrenea . Our land is a diverse and beautiful place, which rises up from the Sea of Everness. In our world, there are only two Kingdoms: the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Shadows. We are blessed with twin sons, Jadan and Jerol. This is a story about their journey through the land of Callow to the city of Sentinel. Sentinel lies in the heart of Bravura and is the hallowed city where the revered Blades of Mettle reside. The Court of Mettle is made up of an elite fighting force that stands watch over our great land. They are sworn to fight to the death in defense of our great ruler and his Kingdom.

According to our King, becoming a Blade should be the goal of every boy. To have the Mark of the Blade is to sit in the highest place of honor. However, to get this great esteem each boy must earn his place. First, he must traverse the open plains of Callow, pass through the mysterious Gravenwood forest, overcome the barren Plain of Gall, endure the punishing heat of Mammon, climb the mountains of Mirth, and conquer the jungle of Gevah. Most importantly, he must find the four keys to Mettle. All this he must do before he can enter Sentinel. The challenge is known as “The Crossing” and is an ancient mission dating back to the beginning of our history.

As you read this tale, you will quickly discover that, even though they are identical twins, Jadan and Jerol do not act alike. Rarely will they choose to do anything in the same manner as each other. Perhaps I can best explain their different methods with a short story from their past.

Once every summer in the Kingdom of Light, the Terreanean elders hold a special celebration called the Festival of Glister. The event is a time of thanksgiving, planning, and fellowship for all. Every Terreanean family gathers for the exciting event, and folks of every age participate. Nobody is left out. There is always an abundance of food, singing, dancing, and games for all ages. Of the many children's games enjoyed during the festival, the boys' favorite is Bull's Eye. In the game a life-sized image of a black bull is painted on a brightly colored sack and suspended between two trees. Directly behind the sack stands a heaping mound of red clay piled up from the ground to the top of the sack. Each boy brings a bow and two arrows. The object of the sport is simple. The boy whose arrow is planted closest to the bull's eye is the

winner.

The winner of the contest is awarded a bull that will supply his family with a bountiful quantity of precious meat. A side of beef was highly prized; meat would provide the luxury of plentiful eating during the usually harsh and fast-approaching Season of Ice.

To play the game each boy stands with his back next to the target. Then, at a signal given by the chief elder, the boy steps fifty paces straight away from the sack. Boys between six and eighteen summers of age participate in the same match. Because of the difference between the size of the older and younger boys' steps, the elders deem this fair. Their reasoning is that the smaller contestants will be closer to the target and the taller boys will be farther away. (I must admit, however, boys who are older yet shorter walk away with the prize more often than boys in other groups!)

Well, several summers ago many boys arrived to participate in the event. Excitement filled the air as a crowd of family and friends gathered to support their much-loved archers. Jadan took his turn by quickly stepping off his paces, spinning around, and delivering his first shot. He almost always releases his arrow before squarely facing his target. His first shot hit just above the bull's front shoulder. The result was a decent shot, but I had seen him do better before.

Each boy is given two shots so that they can adjust their second arrow from the performance of the first. Jadan quickly reloaded and without hesitation released his second and final arrow. He spent little time studying his first shot. This pattern is typical of Jadan, for his usual way to deal with tasks or decisions is to rely on his impulses. "Don't study too hard," he frequently warns.

The second shaft landed just below the bull's lower jaw. Yet again, his effort produced a fairly decent shot, but still about five hands away from the eye. Even though each shot had been respectable by anyone's standards, Jadan expressed great disappointment and stomped off the field in frustration. The crowd offered up a meager round of applause.

Next, seven other boys took their turns. One of the younger lads placed an arrow in one of the beast's ears, only two hands widths from the bull's eye! The shot was a good one and would be tough to beat.

Jerol watched the other boys as they each took their turns. He studied them closely, watching for techniques that he could use during his turn.

Finally, Jerol's name was called. He had practiced intently every day since the last contest. He had even made his bow and arrows! This time he was determined to win the prize for us.

The elder gave Jerol the signal to begin. Jerol stepped off fifty paces and then slowly rotated and faced the target. He studied the bull's eye for a few moments, then slowly lifted his bow and straightened it. He drew a slow, steady breath and pulled back the arrow's shaft against the right corner of his mouth. After a brief pause, he began slowly exhaling, and then, at the right moment, he released the arrow! The arrow found its mark in an instant. The vibrating shaft had landed about halfway between the bull's eye and its nose! The try was a good shot, but not good enough! The earshot that the younger boy had made earlier remained the closest to the eye! Jerol remained focused. He still had one last opportunity to win the prize.

He studied his first try and drew another deep breath. Then he slowly pulled the arrow up to his eye, again made a final adjustment, exhaled, and then let go! This time the hand-carved arrow pierced the sack, sinking halfway into the rubbery clay behind it. A puff of dust billowed out from the front of the sack as ripples bounced through the cloth from corner to corner.

From where Jerol stood, he was having difficulty seeing where his arrow had landed, but

he knew his effort had been a fine shot. The crowd hushed as an elder moved in to get a closer look. He walked to the front of the target and leaned in to examine the arrow. Every eye focused on the old man as he turned to face Jerol. The elder then raised his hand, signaling “Bull’s eye—dead center!”

The audience erupted with applause and loud cheers! Not one of the remaining boys even came close! Jerol’s practice had paid off. Because of his dedication and hard work, our family enjoyed a season of excellent eating.

Several qualities in Jerol’s character separate him from Jadan: his discipline of preparation, his consistency in doing his best in every situation, and his determination to make the most of his second chances. Jerol almost always plans ahead, and he considers the consequences before making a decision. He values counsel from others, including his mother and me. This method to living serves him well in everything he does.

Ever since Jadan was a little boy, however, he has had trouble following instructions. He typically ignores my discipline and continues to go his way. His stubborn unwillingness to listen to others is what gets him into the most trouble. He rarely plans ahead and usually acts before considering the consequences. These differences have always been evident, but they seem to have become more obvious during our time in Gelandesprung.

Even the manners in which the twins packed for the Crossing were different! Jerol placed his belongings in order and used a detailed checklist. He wanted to make sure that he did not leave anything out. But Jadan just randomly threw items into his pack. From every appearance, there was no forethought to his behavior.

As you will see, the dissimilarity between Jadan and Jerol will play a decisive role in the outcome of this story. So, pay attention and learn.

Chapter 3 The Gift

“The King so loved Terrenea that he gave his one and only Son, so that every soul who believes in the Prince shall not die, but will live forever.” Logos 43:3:16

Despite the brothers’ glaring differences, they each would still have to reach three objectives before being allowed to sit on the court of Mettle. No exceptions would be made, for these are required for all who want to make their Crossing:

1. First, each boy must receive a mysterious gift offered by Prince Paladin, King Deus’ son.
2. Second, each boy must take part in Gerhorsam, a ceremony where the boy must make a vow of submission.
3. And third, every boy is required to find four magical* keys. These keys will unlock the door which passes through the wall of Devoir*and offers access to Sentinel.

To add even more difficulty to their journey, countless enemies stand in opposition to the King of Light and his followers. To this day, they are part of The Nether World, a place where the followers of evil live. Azrael, the deceiver, rules over it. Because he can never be as powerful as King Deus, Azrael despises the King and all Terreneans.

In fact, the Evil Lord’s daily goal is to hurt as many of us as possible. He especially delights in misleading and gradually turning those of us who are weak against our King. Because of Azrael’s treachery, Mankind was cursed. And a special “gift” was required to restore what was lost. Through ages past Azrael has confused and diverted many boys during their difficult journey to Sentinel. Because of his hateful tricks, these unfortunate souls will never become Blades and, instead, will spend their entire lives aimlessly wandering through Bravura. In the end, Azrael and his followers will be the ones who Jerol and Jadan will have to overcome if they ever hope to become part of the King’s court of honor.

Receiving “the gift” is the most important of the three objectives of a boy’s Crossing. Knowing the history of the gift is fascinating and needed to understanding its role in the quest. To have the gift means life. To not have the gift in the end means death. Every boy should know the story of “The Gift.”

Many, many summers ago, my people came to live in Terrenea. They were vagabonds living in a world between fire and ice, totally dependent on water for their survival. Compared to most other creatures, they were frail. Because of this, they tended to avoid natural extremes. Most were driven by a longing desire for comfort. They were mostly lovers of pleasure, sometimes even at the expense of their well-being.

However, despite their many weaknesses, the King still loved them deeply and supplied their every daily need. He gave them food and safety from harm.

In the beginning, he built for them a perfect place in which to live called Shalom*. A beautiful and spacious garden entirely surrounded and protected by four tall walls. Each wall was a well-built barrier, the likes of which they had never seen before. Long before the Terreneans’ arrival, the King had constructed the walls out of tenets*, special building blocks made of a tough and magical material. They were so sturdy that nothing had ever been known to break them.

Right from the start, King Deus told the people, “If you will stay within these walls and

obey my instructions for living, I will supply everything you need! But beware,” he warned, “if you decide to go outside the walls and go your own way, you will surely die!”

Well, soon Azrael became consumed by Lord Deus’ deep love for the Terreneans, for the history between him and the King goes way back before the beginning of time.

Ages ago, the evil leader and his army had been banished from the Kingdom of Light for trying to overthrow Lord Deus. Consequently, Azrael’s every breath and thought became driven by a passion for revenge. Fueled by his rage at the good King’s love and promise to provide for his people, Azrael developed a plan he hoped would trick the naïve inhabitants of Shalom.

To carry out his plan, Azrael disguised himself as a cute, approachable Corkscrew, a weasel-like creature that lived in the garden. Masquerading as this innocent-looking animal, the deceiver approached the unsuspecting Terreneans and began to enact his plot.

“Why would a loving King threaten you?” he squeaked. “Why would he tell you that if you went outside the walls that you would die? Surely you misunderstood him. The King doesn’t want you to go outside the walls because, if you do, you will know as much as he knows. He wants you to stay inside so that he can have control over you. I wonder what’s so important out there that He doesn’t want you to know about?”

With just one innocent-sounding question, Azrael had drilled seeds of distrust into the peoples’ minds. The seeds soon grew into a dangerous decision of defiance, and the curious crowd marched to the tenet gate.

Eager to see what was on the other side, they pushed open the heavy barrier. Just as the King had warned, when they walked through and beyond the safety of the garden’s walls, a chain of events started that changed my people’s way of life forever!

Directly above the towering door sat a tiny ancient vase. Solid black and dull, for ages past the little urn had set undisturbed. How it got there was a mystery. The motion of the gate jarred the vase, which in turn began to teeter back and forth with increasing frequency. The small clay pot worked its way from the edge and tumbled down to the hard ground below.

The brittle container shattered upon impact, exploding in a grey mass of swirling shadows and vapors. The cloud began moving as though it were a living thing. The smoke-like haze remained low to the ground then divided and began spreading out in every direction like a mass of slithering serpents. The prideful Terreneans had unknowingly released the poison of iniquity! Iniquity* was so vile that, sooner or later, it destroyed everything it touched! Iniquity would slowly invade and take up residence in all living things. If left unchecked the evil poison would eventually snuff out all life.

Sometimes iniquity can kill in an instant, but usually the toxin takes many summers before claiming victory. Today iniquity still lives, being passed on from generation to generation. The most disturbing fact about this hideous poison is not that it can destroy all physical life, but that it can entangle and slay the spirit as well! Iniquity is by far the most destructive force known to my people. Before long the dire affects of iniquity’s poison seeped into the life’s blood of every living thing in Terrenea!

Despite Deus’ love, the Terreneans had chosen to break his heart. As a consequence of their waywardness, they were cast out of Shalom and into a drastically different world—a world where they would have to work hard just to survive! They would have to stay alert, for without the wall’s protection, Azrael’s desire for the peoples’ destruction would be a daily threat.

“How could they be so arrogant and disregard my love?” cried the King. “I tried to warn them! I gave them everything they needed—their food, their clothes, and a place to live! And now, because they followed their self-centered desires instead of my way, they have become

infected and so weakened by iniquity that we must live worlds apart!” The King was heartbroken and began to weep.

Even though deeply hurt by their disobedience, Deus quickly came up with a plan for the traitors’ rescue! Long before Terrenea’s birth, he knew that someday the people would rebel. So, he had already prepared a plan for their future salvation. The solution would be the most amazing expression yet of his love for them. However, their freedom would come at a high personal cost. Paladin, Deus’ only son would do all the work.

One day as the King and Paladin were strolling through Shalom, the father began to share with his son his rescue plan. “As you know, my son, Terrenea is in much trouble.”

“Yes, Father. I know,” responded the Prince. “I’m so sorry that they have hurt you, and it grieves me as well that they are in such misery. There must be something we can do.”

“Well, there is a way we can help them. In fact, there is only one way. But it will call for a level of sacrifice that will be hard for them to understand. Their condition is so bad that the only way they will be able to survive is through carrying out the Act of Vicar*.”

Paladin stopped as the King walked on. “But, Father,” Paladin exclaimed. “No one here has ever had to do that before! Its cost would be so great, trading a Royal’s life for theirs!”

King Deus stopped and peered deeply into his son’s eyes. “Yes, I know. But it is the only way to guarantee their freedom and restore our fellowship.”

Paladin and his father knew that the Act of Vicar demanded for someone of Royal lineage to substitute his blood for the infected blood of Mankind. Because iniquity was so potent, eliminating the curse would call for the death of the Royal and every cleansing drop of his precious blood! Even though the Royal people possessed mystifying powers of regeneration and life, the pain and suffering of death would still be a heavy burden to bear.

Paladin deeply loved the King and the Terrenean people. His heart was heavy and he wanted to do something to restore his father’s joy. The good prince studied what his father had said for many days. Then one day he approached the throne. Paladin stopped and faced his father. “Yes my son.” Greeted the King. “Father, let *me* go and save them,” Paladin solemnly offered.

The King was not surprised by his son’s request, for the prince was one of a kind. King Deus could see that Paladin’s mind was made up, so he agreed and the plan was set. The courageous prince would endure pain and death and be the peoples’ only hope.

Though anxious to go, the brave prince would have to refrain until the time was right. So, he patiently waited for the King’s command to go to Terrenea. Once given the instruction to go, he would have to go alone. Buying Mankind’s liberty would call for the greatest submission of all time: going from the splendor of living with the King to living in the Terreneans’ harsh world. Paladin’s sacrifice would be a gift of matchless worth!

After several summers of waiting, the King gave Paladin the orders to go. The prince wasted no time and traveled to Terrenea where he lived side by side with the people. For thirty summers he lived as they lived before beginning the first phase of his mission. He began by reminding the people of their rocky past and desperate need for healing. From the start, he told them that he was King Deus’ son and had come to save them.

But to his dismay, most found his story too hard to believe. As far back as the people could recall, no member of the Royal family had ever lived among them. “No Royal family would dare mingle with us,” they grumbled.

It was common knowledge that ever since iniquity’s release, to stand next to royalty meant one’s instant death. If Paladin were really royalty, how could they be near him and

survive? They did not understand. Terrenea's fall had happened so long ago that most of them were unaware that they were even sick. Since, to the untrained eye, there were no obvious outward signs of illness, most of them just refused to believe that they even needed help.

From their perspective, life was good, and all of the talk about sickness and dying was depressing and uncomfortable. Avoiding the topic altogether seemed best. Once again, Mankind's desire for comfort had clouded the truth!

Paladin refused to give up and every day continued to share his news of hope. "Listen, my friends. I have come to rescue you from the curse! I bring you a gift—the only thing that can stop the advance of this blight! Once you have it, your spirits will be freed from death, and, just as your ancestors of long ago, you once again will be able to walk beside my father! But, listen! Even though the gift will block the poison's ultimate victory over you, you must know that, as long as you live in Terrenea, you will still have to battle with its effects every day! To stay strong and overcome, you need to spend time each day with my father. Heeding his guidance will allow you to stand against Azrael's trickery. So, pay attention, my friends. Without daily help from the King," he warned, "you will be defenseless and alone! But once you are back in good standing with my father, his full resources will be on hand to help you! I am the King's only son and as such have the authority to tell you these things and to offer myself on your behalf!"

The voice of a skeptic rang out from the silent crowd. "But how can just one person offer the cure for so many?"

Looking up and into the sky, Paladin responded, "Just as all darkness, which fills the nighttime sky, flees from the flickering light of one star, so will your disease run away from the awesome power of just one drop of my blood."

The noise of the crowd began to build. The prince looked down into the eyes of the people and proclaimed, "Unfortunately, Azrael, the leader of The Damned, knows of my presence here. I know he seeks my death and soon he will stir up a crowd by accusing me with lies, and I will be brutally attacked by his followers!"

Paladin pointed to the grey outline of a distant hill. "Azrael plans to have me executed on top of Mount Hecatomb*! There I will allow my blood to be emptied on the ground to release healing for all who will believe! And when these things happen, don't be afraid. For my death is part of the King's plan for your rescue! Do not be deceived; they will not take my life from me. Instead, I have chosen to surrender it on your behalf. And remember this: no matter how cruel and hateful Azrael's blows to me may seem, the victory of my sacrifice will finally erase their sting! The release of my blood will fill all time and space with its healing power. It will never fade away! And from that glorious day forward, its power will not only be there for you, but for your children and every future generation as well!"

Pausing for a moment, the passionate Prince looked back and forth through the crowd. His countenance changed from that of a warrior ready for battle to one of a shepherd stretched out on the bank of a raging river, reaching out his staff to a helpless lamb struggling with the current. "My friends, before you can get healing from my sacrifice, you must do one very important thing. It will be simple, yet will mean the difference between your life and death."

The entire crowd grew still and leaned in toward him. "Only those of you who place your trust in my gift's ability to save you will be able to have its cure! Its healing will only be possible for those who believe that it is real!" He began to shake his head. "My father and I will not waste my suffering on anyone who does not believe us, on anybody who thinks that we are liars. Those of you who have my gift will live forever and be able to talk directly to my father as often as you choose! Those who reject my gift will continue to live bound in iniquity's grip. Those of you

who reject me already have your fate decided. You will in the end be captured by Azrael and die.”

Paladin’s words soon proved true. The Prince allowed an angry mob to take and then brutally murder him. For two days his crushed and lifeless body lay in a small damp cave. The Terreneans were in chaos. Some were convinced that the Prince’s murder proved that he had never been of royal blood. Others were confused and afraid, unsure of what to think.

Meanwhile, Azrael, giddy and proud of his apparent victory, threw a huge party for the Nether World. He was even so brash in broadcasting a prediction that without the King’s help, Terrenea was doomed to self-destruction. The old demon knew that Paladin was the Terrenean’s only hope. Drunk with hate, Azrael felt sure that the war of the ages was about to end, and at last he would rule over the great King of light and all of his followers.

For two chaotic days after Paladin’s murder, there was a shroud of gloom and a chill that settled over the land. Some spoke of seeing a thin, black cover of clouds seep in from the North during the execution. Others claimed that they had seen the sun stop shining as though someone had put out its flame! The dark leader was beginning to get what he had always dreamed of. The people of Terrenea were starting to panic. Their hope seemed to be gone.

Just as Azrael had prophesied, the war of the ages *was* over, but its outcome was not as he had hoped. Because before dawn on the third day following his murder, Paladin* took a full breath and sat up! He had revived as if awakened from a restful sleep. With one breath, the warrior prince melted the chains of death as if they were made of wax! Miraculously, his badly broken body was totally healed and even better than before! The sun burst through and scattered the gloomy clouds, and the Prince quietly walked out into the daylight. He was showing Mankind that they could be free! All that the people needed to do was to receive his gift and trust what he had done on their behalf. If they did this, they would be given a brand new life. Afterwards, Paladin stayed with the community a short time to explain what had happened. Then he went back home to be with his father. Lord Deus’ part of the plan was complete. The Terreneans now had an important choice to make.

Reeling from shock at the living, breathing proof that Paladin had offered Mankind, Azrael began spreading lies throughout Callow and Bravura. “It was just a clever magician’s trick,” he shouted. “He wasn’t really dead. Besides, how can blood change anything? Seeing is not believing; haven’t you all been fooled more than once by a mirage? Where is this hero anyway? All this talk about sickness and cures is pure fantasy! You don’t feel sick, do you?” Amazingly, there were many who bought into Azrael’s lies and did not believe in Paladin’s promise, even after living with him, witnessing his death, and seeing him alive again!

Azrael was convincing and his influence was great in discrediting the worth of what the Prince had done. Thus, to document his son’s victory for future generations, the King compiled Paladin’s account into a group of sixty-six stories known as “The Logos*.” The sacred writings were a collection of ancient history, poetry, law, prophecy, and much more, personally dictated by the King. Written down by Terrenean scribes and preserved on two scrolls. The Logos was not only to be the banner of the marvelous news about “the gift,”—“The King so loved Terrenea that he gave his one and only Son, so that every soul who believes in the Prince shall not die, but will live forever” (Logos 43:3:16), but the knowledge was to be used as the guidebook for Mankind’s daily living—“useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training” (Logos 55:3:16) After completing the Logos, the King commanded that the elders of all future generations be responsible for sharing the good news of the gift with their children and fellow Terreneans.

Now you know why the gift is so important. Without it, a boy will never be able to sit on

manhood's hallowed court, for no one can stand against Azrael in his own power. However, with the gift a boy has access to all of the King's wealth. If he chooses to use those resources, the gift means life and success to the Blade. To not have the gift or to ignore its power means eventual death.

Chapter 4 Sin and Prayer

“Don’t take chances, but send Prayer often with notes to the King.” Logos 50:4:6

“Paladin told them, this is the truth. Whoever spends time with Sin is the slave of Sin.”
Logos 43:8:34

Receiving the Gift, submitting to the King, and finding the keys are critical steps that must be taken before entering Sentinel. However, there is one other important decision that Deus strongly encourages each boy to make. It is the choice of a companion to keep him company during the lonely times on the journey (and there are many). Choosing the right partner greatly increases a boy’s likelihood of receiving the Mark of the Blade.

Jadan had owned four pets, but the one he adored the most was a naughty pig named Sin. Sin* was grey as ash and weighed as much as three full sacks of freshly cut corn. He was every bit of three steps long from nose to tail and six hands tall at the shoulder. One ear bent double over a pale white eye and flopped up and down when he walked; the other ear was stiff and pointed straight up. Four hook-like horns jutted from the sides of his head, and large menacing tusks filled his mouth. His hide was knobby and rough (when it was not matted in mud or covered with dirt). Sin was born with an unusually straight tail that was twice as long as other pigs’. He loved to flip his hairy whip from side to side as he strutted about.

His stare could be unnerving, for his eyes were odd in appearance. One eye stayed bloodshot most of the time and looked to be solid red. However, despite Sin’s frightening appearance, Jadan was fond of him, for he had raised Sin from a piglet.

At first Jadan did not spend much time with Sin, but the more they hung around one another, the more attached Jadan became. They were almost inseparable. From the start, the mischievous little pig got into things he shouldn’t. Jadan was constantly in some kind of trouble for not keeping Sin under control. Sin would follow Jadan everywhere, and greatly annoyed everyone, that is except for Jadan. Even though Sin was sure to cause trouble, Jadan just would not leave him behind. So, he chose Sin as his pal for the quest.

Jerol’s choice of a partner was interesting as well. While living in Palaestral, Jerol had found a baby, Royal falcon stuck in a big patch of hook briars on the outskirts of a straw grass field behind our home. Despite its tiny size, the baby bird had no fear and was gentle. The cap of its head was as black as coal. His eyes were piercing blue, looking out from a ring of purest white. The tops of his wings were thick and dark brown and underlain by a fan of even sturdier feathers. His chest was a lighter brown and full of muscles larger than those found on ordinary falcons. Even as a tiny chick, his talons were sharp and surprisingly powerful. Not long after he brought the baby bird home, Jerol realized just how special the little fellow was.

Jerol named his new friend Prayer*. Over the span of several summers, they became close companions. By the time Jerol was ready for the Crossing, Prayer had grown into a bird of great size. He was majestic, beautiful, and possessed enormous strength. Because of Jerol’s love and care, Prayer had grown to be one of the strongest falcons in all of Callow. His wingspan had grown to be more than sixty hands wide from wingtip to wingtip! On a few occasions, while playing with Jerol, Prayer had lifted him off the ground and carried him for short distances, amazing Jerol’s friends! Choosing a traveling buddy proved to be a simple task for Jerol. He

would take Prayer, for Prayer had already shown to be a trusted ally.

Well, you know from where Jadan and Jerol have come. You know that even though they are twins, they have different personalities, and you have met their friends Sin and Prayer. Come; join the eager brothers as they go on the adventure of a lifetime. It's time for their Crossing to begin!

Chapter 5 Gehorsam

"Travel on the narrow path. For wide and broad is the road that leads to trouble, and many travel on it, but small is the trail and narrow the path that leads to Sentinel, and only a few find it." Logos 40:7:13

Gelandesprung, the Callow city of adventure. All Terreneans decide in Gelandesprung whether they will pursue the Mark of the Blade or settle for a less than fulfilling destiny. The time had come for Jadan and Jerol to launch out from the well-known city in search of Sentinel's keys. They had each been looking forward to their Crossings ever since they were little boys. So, when the time came for them to start packing, they could hardly contain their joy. They hurriedly packed clothes and personal belongings, were fitted for armor, polished their swords, and cloaks that Charity had lovingly made for each of them to take on their Crossing. Finally, they wrapped and added their sacred Scrolls. Packing for the trip usually took several days, but for the eager brothers, the job was done in half the time.

Every boy whose parents belong to the Kingdom of Light is given a copy of the Scrolls, known as the Logos, before leaving Gelandesprung. But the decision is left for each boy to make whether to take the sacred teachings. So, it was welcomed news when we learned that the boys had taken our advice and chosen to carry the Scrolls on their Crossing. We knew that the Logos would prove its worth once they were alone on the road, for the trip would be long and not only test their physical strength, but in time would test the depths of their souls.

At last the time to leave Gelandesprung had arrived. The impatient brothers were packed and ready to embark on their quests. Each of them had received Paladin's gift, and each had made their choice of traveling comrades. Every preparation had been made except for their vows of submission.

Submission is recognized by King Deus as another needed step in receiving an invitation to the King's table. The Logos is clear: "Go and make followers of all people, requiring their submission in the name of the King and of Paladin" (Logos 40:28:19). Submission is mandatory, the second of the Crossing's three main objectives. Boys who want to receive the full rewards of the Mark must follow through with the expectations of Gerhorsam*. Accepting the gift always comes first. Then, with a pure heart, submission should always follow.

The rite of Gehorsam is a symbolic announcement to Mankind of each boy's devotion to Deus and His Kingdom and a visible expression of his sincerity in making the Crossing. The Logos encourages each boy to set his sights toward Mettle instead of wandering through Adulthood with no clear purpose. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (Logos 46:13:11).

The picture of Gehorsam would illustrate each boy's willingness to turn his back on his old ways to devote his full attention to pursuing the Kingdom. His actions would show his desire to lay aside childish things to attain maturity.

The ceremony was not complicated or dangerous (as long as you could hold your breath). Each boy would make his vow and, witnessed by the town's people, be dunked under water in a pool and then lifted back up.

Always wanting to impress, Jadan was the first to announce his desire for the rite of Gehorsam. "Mother, I wish to make my submission to the King, for I know that it is my destiny

to serve him.”

So, arrangements were made and, a few days later, his mother, Jerol and I watched with the town’s people and rejoiced as he was immersed and blessed by the village cleric. To most folks, Jadan’s conduct appeared good on the outside. However, as we found out later, and to our dismay, his compliance was nothing but a staged performance by a clever actor. Jadan had only gone along because he wanted approval, not because he was expressing dedication to the King! Jadan had no intention of heeding the Logos’ guidance, for he had a bad habit of ignoring its teachings. For him, success was about impressing others, not about pleasing the King.

As for Jerol, he had long been studying the cost of his decision before making his vow. He was obedient, because he was determined to serve the King no matter what the cost.

Finally, the prerequisites were in place and the time had come to leave the safety of the city; it was time to meet the challenge of the Crossing, find the four keys, unlock the door, and enter Sentinel.

It would take at least four full moons to get to their first stop. So, early in the morning, they hoisted their bulging backpacks, received final blessings from their mother and me, and bounced out to the village gate. “I am proud of you!” I shouted, as their mother waved goodbye, hoping the boys would not see her tear-filled eyes. And, with mixed emotions, excitement, and a sense of wonder, their adventure into the unknown began.

At first the boys laughed, sang songs, and talked as they passed through the golden prairies of Callow. Sin kept busy running through the brush while Prayer flew faithful watch overhead. But after a few days, the journey began to grow more burdensome. At times they struggled with boredom. The territory was new to them, and they began to feel homesick. Even so, they pushed eastward across the gentle waters of Élan* Creek to the craggy ridges of the Black Mountains. They had been told that the odds were good for finding one of the keys on the mountain’s side.

After several more days of travel past a foggy Lake Daunt* and across the rolling hills of Childhood, the weary brothers stood just west of the Wistful* River. Its current was slow and the water was surprisingly clean for a channel of its size. Its crystal waters sparkled, reflecting the rich blue of the cloudless sky. Looking to the east, over the timberline of a vast forest, they could see the mountains in the distance. Its ominous ridge looked like enormous jagged teeth jutting up and into the sky. But the brothers had come too far to turn back now. Despite the mountain’s menacing appearance, the boys sensed adventure and hiked on with a renewed spirit of curiosity.

Chapter 6
Gravenwood

"You shall not make to yourselves any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in Terrenea beneath, or that is in the water under the ground. You shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them. For I Deus your King am a jealous King."
Logos 2:20:4,5

After crossing the shallow waters of the Wistful River, the only thing standing between the brothers and the mountains was the sprawling Gravenwood forest. A gorgeous stand of old timber, Gravenwood stretched from the Mirth Mountains to the north and south to the Swivet River. The tall tree trunks were three steps across with stocky limbs like strong arms stretching out on every side. From the ground, the first limbs did not appear until about halfway up their massive trunks. The foliage was mostly on the ends of the limbs, so from ground level one could see all the way up the mighty trunks to their tops. The upper canopy was thick, making Jerol's job of keeping up with Prayer most difficult. Nonetheless, he knew that even if he could not see Prayer, his trusted friend would not be far away should Jerol need him. Sin stayed close to the brothers exploring the rich ground cover for grub.

To get their bearings, the brothers knelt down and removed five fist-sized, green stones from their packs. These were enchanted stones passed down to the boys from their grandfathers. Our family has used them for generations to help us find our way. The translucent stones possess a peculiar ability to attract metal. As was customary, a level place was cleared out on the ground and the stones positioned in a circle about two steps wide. They then placed one stone in the middle of the ring. Jadan drew his sword and balanced its slender blade on the center rock. Released from his grip, the sword began slowly rotating until stopping then pointing toward the heart of Gravenwood.

"Following the sword would be our shortest path to Sentinel," Jerol remarked.

"You're right, Brother. Taking any other line would add days maybe even weeks to our journey. Besides, the forest is so enormous that our chances of running into the mound would be small. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I believe those stories about the mound anyway," Jadan replied.

"I know what you mean. Those tales about the mounds were so fantastic. Surely they are fables," Jerol agreed.

(I had warned the boys many times about an ancient altar mound rising up from deep in Gravenwood's heart. Many similar mounds were scattered throughout Terrenea. Those who followed the Way of Light knew to avoid them. But, my sons did not always take me seriously).

So, the boys decided to follow the sword and plotted a course east-southeast and moved ahead.

"I hope Mother and Father are worried about us," Jadan said as the two marched deeper into the woods. "I sure was glad to get away from those two. I was beginning to feel as if I couldn't even breathe without Father giving me some kind of serious lecture, or Mother telling me to be careful or you'll get hurt!"

"Yes, Brother. Father can be a little longwinded sometimes," Jerol responded.

It was midday and everywhere they looked they could see huge columns of light shining through occasional openings in the covering above.

"Remember how mad Father got when he found out I had gone swinging on those vines

over Sawtooth ravine? I thought he was going to really let me have it!” Jadan laughed.

“Yeah, I thought he was going to skin you alive. When he warns us not to do something and then we do it—That’s when the hammer falls,” Jerol quipped.

“Well, I’m glad I don’t have to listen to his yakkin’ anymore,” Jadan remarked.

Jerol stopped. “Jadan, don’t talk that way about Father. He may be longwinded, but his lectures have saved our hides more than once. I think we would be smart to consider that the Logos commands us to “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days in Terrenea may be long which Deus your King gives you” (Logos 2: 20:12).

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Jadan waved with his hand.

Just then the boys were halted by two rain foxes and a bracon scurrying past in a frenzy. This was the boys’ first encounter with these types of wildlife. Bracons are weasel-like creatures with solid black heads; rain foxes are known for their haunting cries during rain showers. Bracons are the favorite food of rain foxes. This was an unusual sight to see them so far back in the forest. Typically these species were only found on the prairies of Callow. And even more curious, the bracon was chasing the fox! Jerol and Jadan watched as the furry critters darted past them and out of sight. Before the brothers could say much, a couple of silver deer bounded past. Not far behind came a flock of prairie birds flying fast and through, dodging the low-lying limbs. The boys’ attention was drawn back to the forest floor as three squawking tree hogs scampered by. Tree hogs—small rodents with sharp claws, resembling hairless guinea pigs—are tree dwellers and are unique to Gravenwood. Even the insects appeared to be moving to the center of the woods. Jerol knelt down to discover ants and bugs marching in one accord. Jadan ran ahead to see if he could spot anything out of the ordinary.

“See anything, Brother?” Jerol shouted.

“Nope, just a bunch of wild animals running from everywhere and all going in the same direction,” Jadan reported.

Sin, who was rooting close by, stopped and lifted his head up, tilting it back and forth and listening to something the brothers’ could not hear. The nervous pig became increasingly agitated and started squealing and grunting.

“Hey, what’s the matter with your pig?” Jerol asked.

Jadan watched in bewilderment as Sin bolted off, disappearing into the forest. The woodland was abuzz with the noise of crawling, flying, running animals.

Jadan pointed at the woods. “Look, Jerol. Every creature in sight is going in the same direction.” The brothers regrouped and scratched their heads.

“What do you think it means?” Jadan asked.

“I don’t know, Brother. But I think it would a mistake to go in the same direction. Let me use the sword to help with our bearing. Perhaps we should chart another course to Sentinel.” Jadan reluctantly agreed, even though still concerned about why Sin had left.

Jerol drew his sword and placed it on the center rock. At the beginning of their trip the sword had stopped, pointing in the direction of Sentinel. But this time the blade was spinning! When released from his grip, the blade began rotating slowly in a circle! This had never happened before. Utterly baffled, Jadan removed Jerol’s sword and replaced it with his own. Just like his brother’s, Jadan’s blade began to spin.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Jerol remarked. “There is evidently some kind of strange force all around us. I suggest we change course and move to our right until we move beyond the curse on this place.”

“Yeah. Well, I don’t much care about makin’ it to Sentinel right now,” Jadan stated. “I’ve got to get to Sin before something bad happens to him.” Jadan began walking away and in the direction of where he had last seen Sin.

“Jadan, wait! Not so fast! This is too strange to just take off without thinking it through. Who knows what’s going on in there? Jerol pointed to the heart of the forest.

“Sorry, Brother. No time to talk. I’ll catch up with you at Tryst Rock at the base of the Black Mountains. Give me six days. If I’m not at Tryst by then, come and get me.” Jadan shouted as he disappeared into the distant shade.

Jerol felt a profound responsibility for his brother’s welfare, but for them to walk into potential trouble would not be smart. “Jadan is clever. He knows what he’s doing,” Jerol thought. “He can take care of himself.” So, Jerol decided to take a different line to the rendezvous point and wait. He felt that taking a different course than the animals would be his best bet of avoiding danger. And even though changing his track potentially meant a longer journey to the mountains, it was a sacrifice well worth making.

For the rest of that day Jadan followed the animals deeper into the woods. Night fell, but Jadan pushed on. With no moon to light his way, Jadan used his tortoise shell lamp. Even by lamplight the forest was spooky. He could hear the sounds of animals rustling across the ground and through the brush just beyond his circle of light. At one point the tired boy walked along the bank of a big pond and made a disturbing discovery. He found a heaping mound of fish, flipping and flopping, bunched up onto one bank of the pond. He watched in wonder as other fish continued jumping out of the water and onto the pile. Something was beckoning the animals. But what could it be? He walked on for a few more steps before giving in to his weary body. So he found a large hollowed out log, cleared out a good spot, and settled down for the night.

For the next two days, Jadan followed the parade deeper into Gravenwood. Around midafternoon on the second day, he looked up and thought he could see animals congregating in the distance. As he moved closer, he witnessed a sight that was beyond explanation. In the heart of the woodland the ground began to swell into an immense mound from which towered five enormous monoliths. Each rose skyward to the height of about two hundred hands and was about five steps wide at their base. From what Jadan could tell, they were made of solid white granite.

“This must be the altar mound. I remember what Father said about this place, but I’ve got to see with my own eyes if it is true,” Jadan thought. Instead of running away, Jadan’s curiosity took hold, pulling him closer to the mound. As he got closer he could see that four of the giant stones were graven in the shapes of animals. There was a lion, an eagle, a dragon and a tigerfish. All four were evenly spread out around a center monument.

The lion stood erect on its hind legs with front legs spread apart and paws open exposing claws. Its head was thrown back roaring to the sky. The eagle stood proudly, with head held high and wings folded back as though guarding its nest. The dragon rested on its hindquarters but with head falling down and mouth open wide. And lastly, the tigerfish was chasing its prey with mouth open wide yielding rows of jagged teeth.

The fifth statue, however, rose up in the center and was fashioned in the image of a Terrenean! The figure was broader at the base and stood taller than the others. The monolith towered to a staggering height of about three hundred hands and was nearly twenty-five steps wide at its foundation! The impressive statue appeared to be in the likeness of a statesman dressed in ceremonial robe and champion’s crown.

Standing about one hundred steps from the mound, Jadan could see the lion facing him. To the lion's left stood the dragon facing away from the center; to the lion's right was the eagle which also faced away from the center of the mound. The Terrenean statue stood in the center of the mound with its back to Jadan. Barely visible, beyond the center monolith, stood the tigerfish facing away from Jadan. Jadan looked with wonder at the scene before him. The air was filled with the noise of grunts, chirps, clicks, growls, and hissing as creatures of the forest continued their steady pilgrimage toward the mound. Fowl were flying in from every direction. Upon closer investigation, Jadan perceived that they were flocking to the eagle monolith.

The white eagle's head was grotesque, covered in bird droppings and countless motionless birds. Birds stood immobile covering every ledge of the statue with other birds hovering and searching for a place to land. Astonished, Jadan witnessed a couple of birds land and then stop as though frozen in ice! On the ground and encircling the statue's base lay a mat of countless bones and on top of the bones fluttered many additional fowl fighting for a place to sit. Jadan looked to his left to witness a similar scene at the dragon's stone. Snakes, turtles, and lizards were moving toward the dragon until they got to within about ten paces from the stone. Similar to the eagle, serpent bones lay scattered about the Dragon's base covered by a myriad of motionless cold-blooded creatures. Jadan could see many scorpions and vipers coiled atop and hanging like hair from the top of the dragon's head.

Jadan looked back down to ground level and watched as nearly three hundred pigs moved near and around the statues. They were scattered across the mound, scurrying about eating, rutting, squealing, grunting.

As he looked beyond the center stone, what he saw sent chills up his spine. Spread over a large area and posing like statues were the bodies and skeletons of people. The silent crowd stood locked in countless positions, many with shocked expressions and hands over their mouths. Even though there were as many unusual poses as there were people, there was still one eerie thing they had in common: Every single one of them appeared to be gazing up in the same direction. "What are they looking at?" Jadan questioned. They each appeared to be staring at the monolith in the center of the mound. "But why the statue of the Terrenean?" Jadan wondered.

Just then he spotted Sin among dozens of other busy swine plowing through some bones near the base of the lion. "Sin, Sin, over here!" Jadan shouted as he ran to his buddy. But Sin disregarded him and continued to dig. Jadan worked his way over, pushing and shoving animals out of his way. They seemed oblivious of his presence. "Sin, it's me. What's wrong with you?" Jadan heaved on Sin's back with all his might, but the stubborn pig merely ignored him and refused to budge. Jadan was concerned for Sin, but he knew that he needed to see if he could help the Terreneans. So, he hurried back to get a closer look.

Up close Jadan discovered that some people appeared to be starving and looked ill. Many looked as though they were close to death! "It's worse than I thought. I've got to do something and fast!" Jadan thought. He was in a most desperate situation. Jadan ran over to a young boy, not much older than himself, who was staring at the monolith with a sad look on his face. Jadan approached and, with his back to the statue, stood face to face with the listless child. Staring into the boy's glassy eyes for a sign of life, he tried to communicate. "Hello! Can you hear me?" A tear slowly formed, and then rolled from the corner of the boy's eye and down his ashen cheek. "Don't worry. I'll get you out of this!" Jadan tried to offer hope.

Jadan noticed that the boy's eyes did not move but stared straight ahead as though Jadan were not even there! As he circled around and behind the boy, the monument's face came into

view. Instinctively Jadan looked up and into the eyes of the great statue. Like a god made of stone, the monolith was stately and regal with eyes of darkness. Instantly, he felt something like icicles forming inside his heart! His blood began to feel like ice water. With each heartbeat he could feel his body going to sleep! A deep alarming chill began spreading throughout his arms and legs. Frantic, he tried to look away, but could not. His body quickly grew cold and refused to move. Try as he might to pull away, it was too late. The mysterious monolith had claimed another captive. Jadan was in deep trouble.

Jerol had covered much territory since parting ways with Jadan. He had decided to move south, directly crossing the line of travel of the animals. He reasoned this would take him past the influence of the invisible force in the least amount of time. His decision was proved right when, in short order, he crossed through an area of the forest where animals were scurrying about in normal fashion. As he marched on, Jerol kept his mind off his brother by mentally measuring the shadows of the forest. Step by step he made his way toward Tryst. Soon, nightfall came. By the light of his lamp he found a large wigerroot tree. The wigerroot was known for its intricate root systems that fanned out from its base, weaving, forking, and twisting in and out of the ground creating many places where weary travelers could rest for the night. Tired but pleased, Jerol made camp for the evening. He found the perfect spot, cleaned out a space, and bedded down for a welcomed rest.

Jerol was awakened the next morning by cool water dripping onto his face. He opened and focused his eyes on a root a couple of hands above his face. There was a gentle morning rain soaking the trees' high canopy, creating small streams of water running down their ruddy trunks. Jerol listened as the drizzle gently brushed the trees, creating a sound like applause from a crowd. Jerol was cozy in his warm cloak. He did not want to get up and face the discomfort of being wet, but he knew he had better get going if he were going to get to Tryst on time. The rain continued off and on for the remainder of that day and night.

For five more days Jerol traveled before reaching the foothills of the Black Mountain. In the foothills, the trees were spaced farther apart, and the ground was clear of brush and vines. Jerol took about one more half day to reach the rendezvous point. But he had taken longer than he had expected to find the meeting place. Jerol looked around the rock, but found no sign of Jadan. He shouted for his brother, but with no response.

"It's been about six days since I last saw him," Jerol thought. "He said he would meet me here in six days. Well, where is he? Hmm, he *is* late most of the time, so I think I had better wait a little longer before I get too worried."

Jerol did not want to overreact. He decided to set up camp. He decided that he would wait a couple more days for his brother and Sin to show up. But after waiting for only one day, Jerol could delay no longer.

"He should be here by now. I chose a path that circled around the woodland's heart while Jadan moved straight through. I think he could have made it in four days." Jerol wondered.

Fueled by growing concern for his brother's welfare, Jerol hurriedly broke camp, pulled up his gear, and plunged back into the woods.

He had only been traveling for about a day when he came back across the march of the spellbound animals. He had decided to follow them in hopes they would lead him to Jadan. As he made his trek deeper into the forest, Jerol began to spot many trees that were dead or dying. More and more patches of barren areas began to appear, where the trees had died and lost their foliage, scarring the heart of the woodland. Eventually there was no underbrush, just dying trees and ground that was cracked from an occasional rain and constant heat from the sun. The once beautiful landscape was becoming almost inhospitable.

The anxious boy continued to follow the creatures until he saw, between the many lines of lifeless tree trunks, what looked to be a mound of some sort with an outcropping of colossal stone about three hundred steps away. Jerol stopped; something did not look right. He had not much rock on the forest floor during his journey from Tryst. Now he was looking at tons of rock jutting high out of the ground in one spot. “Oh no, it looks like Father knew what he was talking about. I’ve found the altar mound,” Jerol thought. Cautiously, he retrieved his spyglass to get a closer look before moving ahead. As he focused the instrument, the first image was a group of people and skeletons standing with their backs to him!

Jerol felt a lump grow in his throat. He quickly moved his view to the standing stone nearest to him. He was surprised to see a massive carving of a dragon covered with writhing snakes. He looked down at its massive base at piles of bones covered in a mass of many serpents. He quickly shifted his attention in the direction of the center monolith where he spotted Jadan standing behind another boy! Jadan appeared to be looking up and intently at something.

Curious, Jerol moved his glass to investigate further. He looked past Jadan to the base of the monument. The image was blurry so Jerol twisted his glass into focus. He then began moving his view up its side. What he saw was a colossal statue of some dignitary sculpted from beautiful white granite! A remarkable sight to see—a monument of such gigantic proportions carved from a material as hard as white stone. The detail of the art was magnificent. He could see that the figure was dressed in royal clothes and jewels and held something that looked like a scepter in one hand. He continued panning up the statue’s long figure to see its face. First he saw a mouth, then the nose, and then...

Unexpectedly, his view was blocked by something that had moved into his line of sight. Startled, he jerked his eye away from the end of the glass to find Prayer standing about halfway between him and the towering monolith. The graceful bird stood tall with wings spread wide apart. “What is he doing?” Jerol wondered. “It looks like he’s trying to shield me from something.” Sensing danger, Jerol began to quickly piece together what he had just seen. The gigantic sculptures of stone appeared to be idols, and the crowd of lifeless people were looking at them. Instantly, Jerol flashed back in his memory to the full story his grandfather had told him back in Agog about the land of ancient times. Jerol had thought the tale to be a legend, but by the looks of things, it just might be true.

Ages ago, after the Terreneans had been cast out of Shalom, for protection many began assembling into large groups. Usually a group would form around someone or something that had performed an act of heroism. For example, some gathered in the name of the eagle, for some people said that they had witnessed eagles bringing fish to their starving village during a season of drought. Another group gathered to honor the lion, for lions had been seen saving children from stalking bears.

But in reality, Azrael had staged these elaborate rescues in the hopes that Mankind would turn their trust to false leaders and away from the King. Azrael had directed his minions to wear an animal disguise and carry out the deceitful deeds. Steadily, the Evil Lord’s plan began to take

hold, and before long those who were gullible erected massive graven images to honor their new protectors and providers.

Summer after summer, people in increasing numbers began to turn away from King Deus and rely on their creature gods, until one day a Terrenean named Eidolon rose up among the people, doing many great deeds of valor. His fame spread as he helped the sick, encouraged the downcast, and stood up for the homeless and hurting. Azrael watched with interest as Eidolon's influence with Mankind began to grow.

When the time was right, the evil Shadow King offered Eidolon a deal. "If you will serve me, then I will give you anything your heart desires." A covenant was made, and Azrael set in motion what he hoped would seal his victory over the King. The conniving con orchestrated a plan where Eidolon would team up with the beloved creature gods to rule over Mankind. Once the people had pledged their allegiance to Eidolon, Eidolon would point to Azrael, his true source of power. Azrael then would appear and seize the Kingdom. Before long, just as Azrael had foreseen, the Terreneans erected a monolith to worship Eidolon that towered above all others! Nature no longer held their highest praise. The image they worshipped was that of their own kind. At last, Azrael had gotten what he had wanted. He had diverted most of Mankind's attention away from the King and onto itself. Across Terreneia, monoliths were erected one by one until most of Mankind worshipped a graven god. Almost everything in Terreneia was turned into graven icons of every shape and form.

At last, with most of Mankind playing along, Azrael could take his plan to its final stage. He would infuse the eyes of the monoliths with idolatry, the purest form of iniquity. Its evil essence was so cold that it could freeze Mankind in their tracks, rendering them useless to the King! Even though most of Mankind followed Eidolon, there was still a small group who refused to acknowledge him as king. They stood fast in the hope that their place in the Kingdom would one day be restored and their way of life would return just as in the days of Shalom. These warriors of light took seriously the King's warning: "You shall not make to yourselves any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in Terreneia beneath, or that is in the water under the ground. You shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them. For I Deus your King am a jealous King"(Logos 2:20:4,5). Because of the courage of these few, to this day Azrael has not been able to fully claim Deus' kingdom for his own. According to the fable, ancient shrines are still scattered throughout Terreneia, working to capture those who have lost faith in the King.

Jerol was convinced that he had found the ancient shrine of Eidolon in the heart of Gravenwood. The mound was no myth! If he dared to look at Eidolon's eyes, idolatry would claim his soul and he would become useless as the living dead. Without the ability to move, he would starve and die. Over time, all that would be left would be his bones.

Jerol was not sure how long Jadan had been trapped without food or water. He knew he must find a way to break the curse, for time was of critical importance. Jerol wanted to run in and rescue his brother, but he knew if he tried in his own strength he would be overcome by the curse of the mound. So, he made sure to avoid eye contact with the monolith and with his mind racing, turned his back to the mound, sat down, and closed his eyes, searching his heart for a plan. The answer came quickly. Prayer is immune to idolatry! The awesome bird is a Royal falcon! Azrael's evil magic could not taint his regal blood.

Jerol immediately stood up and waved at his friend who remained faithfully shielding him from danger. Even though Jerol stood many steps away from Prayer, the mighty falcon could see him with perfect clarity. Jerol began communicating with his friend by using hand and

arm signals. The royal warrior was trained well and knew exactly what to do. Confident that Prayer would deliver, Jerol sat back down and turned facing away from the mound. With a burst of power, the falcon shot up and into the sky, circled out and back, then flew down, landing on top of the statue's head. He then spread out his wide graceful wings and pushed them down, covering Eidolon's face from view. Prayer screamed out a high shrill, telling Jerol that he could approach the mound.

Jerol knew that he did not have much time and moved in a beeline to his brother. Released from the curse's control, Jadan slowly began to slump. The boy in front of Jadan fell to the ground. Jadan's arms fell to his sides, and then he collapsed as well. People around them began falling in heaps upon the ground! The sacred mound began filling with the noise of swine and animals combined with the voices of moaning people. Jerol knelt down next to his brother and cradled him in his arms. Jadan had lost much weight. Jerol hurriedly pulled his water bag from his pack and placed its spout on his brother's parched lips. At first he refused to drink, but in no time he was gulping so hard that Jerol had to pull the bag away.

Once Jerol was satisfied that he had properly tended to his brother, he began running to and sharing his water with as many others as he could. Some were sick. But, for some, help had come too late, for many were dead. Overwhelmed, Jerol made rounds caring for as many as he could find. He ran to his pack, pulled out and began rationing every bit of his food and honey among the afflicted. While Jerol was rushing from person to person, Prayer screeched again. Jerol looked up. "What is it, boy?" The vigilant bird turned his head to the west. Jerol looked to see eleven boys walking through the mound area, looking around with puzzled expressions etched on their faces.

Jerol immediately stood and began waving in big motions, running to warn them. "Stay back! Stay back! Stay away from the mound!" Jerol shouted. The startled boys stopped and drew their swords. "My name is Jerol. My brother and I were on our way to Sentinel when he was cursed by the enchanted stone. Many more were already here when I arrived. As you can see, my falcon has broken the spell and I am trying to help as many as I can."

One of the boys sheathed his blade and stepped forward. "I am Sanguine* and also heading for Sentinel." The other boys dropped their guard and made hasty introductions as well. "How can we help?" they asked.

"Those of you who have food and drink, go to the hurting. Get as much nourishment in them as they'll take," Jerol responded. "Many are weak. Some are ill. We must move them to safety as quickly as we can, for night will soon be upon us and my falcon can only stand guard for so long."

"Perhaps our falcons can help as well," Sanguine offered as he lifted up a beautiful ruby hanging from his neck. He moved the crimson gem through the sunlight and signaled overhead. Four of the others signaled as well, two with whistles and one by clicking two clear stones together. Almost immediately five great birds flying in level and at a fast rate of speed appeared from just above the tree tops, diving down to join the group. Shul*, Psalter*, Rue*, Pantheon* and Chantry* were Royal falcons! None were as large as Prayer, but each was well trained and ready to fight. Sanguine and the others gave the signals, and the magnificent fowl took their positions, blocking the monoliths from view. Frightened by the feathered fighters, Sin and the other hogs scattered in every direction, squealing into the woods.

The boys broke up and began helping the hurting. Jadan was weak but recovered more quickly than most. Once he had regained his strength, he began ministering aid to the boy who

had collapsed beside him. The boy was thin and close to death. Jadan carried him to safety and began to give him water. “Thank...you...” the boy whispered.

“Save your strength and take this food.” Jadan encouraged.

“What...is...your name?” the boy whispered.

“Jadan. What’s yours?”

“Xeno *.” The weary boy replied, and then collapsed. Those who were able were carried out one by one to a designated area just out of sight of the altar mound. Many trips were made as the boys worked well into the night, by torchlight, until everyone was brought to safety.

Jerol directed the other boys: “Sanguine, have some of your friends build campfires for the night. Position ten of the injured around each fire. The rest of you come with me to gather food and water.”

“Thank you for saving our lives,” Sanguine replied. “Without your warning, I fear what might have happened to us. King Deus would be proud, for you represent him well.”

“No, I owe you thanks. For without your help, many would be lost. Because of you and your good falcons, over a hundred will live to be with their families again,” Jerol responded.

Sanguine and two others built twelve fires straight away and moved the injured around them just as Jerol had instructed. Jerol and the rest returned at daybreak with enough food and water to last a couple more days. Each day the ailing grew stronger until they in turn cared for those around them. Because everyone pitched in, the sick were able to regain enough strength to leave the camp in about five days. Of the one hundred and nine that were rescued from the mound, only seven did not survive.

One by one and sometimes in pairs, the thankful strangers left the safety of the campsite. Sanguine and Shul in time moved on, as did his friends and their falcons. They each promised to find Jadan and Jerol once they arrived in Sentinel. Xeno fully recovered in a couple of days and stayed helping others until he was the last to leave. He vowed that someday he would repay his obligation to Jadan, Jerol, and the others.

Finally, it was back to Jadan and Jerol. The grateful brothers wasted no time in setting their course out of Gravenwood. Retracing his steps, Jerol led them back out of the forest and along the Black Foothills to Tryst Rock.

“Well, Jadan. We made it,” Jerol offered with a look of relief. Jadan seemed preoccupied in thought, staring at the mountains, and did not say anything. Once at Tryst they climbed to its flat top and sat looking up at the colossal mountain range between them and Malevolence. The Black Mountains looked down on the tiny brothers as though daring them to pass.

“Looks like a long road ahead, Brother,” Jadan replied. Jerol nodded his head in agreement and looked at his brother with thankfulness for a second opportunity. The grateful brothers were humbled by their ordeal in Gravenwood and understood that without Prayer they would have been doomed. Jerol’s ever-watchful friend had given them the ability they needed to turn their backs on the shrine and its curse. The brothers had learned their lessons; they would avoid idolatry at all costs. No matter what lay ahead, they would turn their attention back to the Crossing and march on.