

The JUDGES CHRONICLES: A NIGHT'S JOURNEY (BOOK 2)

Introduction: The Fall, the Fallen, and the World of Night

Once before the time of the judges and long before Shavron's rebirth, there was a creature known as the Fallen. This creature was not always known by this name, for it was given to him as an eternal mark of malice for reasons as you will soon read. He hated his Creator and everything that he made, for everything God made reminded the Fallen of God. However before hatred had consumed his heart, the Fallen was created for a noble purpose. Ivornel was commanded by the Holy One to love the new creations with all his being; and since his nature was that of the elegant unicorn, the fallen should have easily carried out the edict given to him. His skin was snowy white. His mane, which flowed like water over his neck, was a radiance of light, and he had large feathery wings to fly among the clouds.

The unicorn knew of his beauty, in fact, he reveled in it. He was a blessing to the creations around him from the land walkers to the sea dwellers. Ivornel was highly respected, but to the unicorn something was amiss. His heart craved more than smiles of courtesy and gestures of friendship. He wanted to be worshiped too, just like God. The Holy One would receive praises through songs, poetry, and other forms of righteous deeds; all of these things, Ivornel relished for. As far as he was concerned, it was he who was the blessing.

"Is it not I who walks among this fertile ground?," he thought, "When I step, is it not I who makes the world at peace? Am I not beautiful-- the greatest of all creation? Why shouldn't I," he thought to himself, "receive praise, to climb the heights of heaven, to have my place on the throne of God."

So he tried to get it, but he was met with futile responses to his call. The more he saw the creatures worshiping the Creator, the more he despised it. It came a day when sin was born in his heart and with such an ugly birth there is the result of death. Ivornel made haste to care out his wickedness: instead of using his gift to bless, he chose to destroy. "If they will not bow down to me as they do God, then I will separate them from Him. If none worship me; then none shall worship Him."

With that, the vice of pride began to seep into his heart like venom. The crafty beast devised a plan to accomplish what he wanted. Ivornel knew of many things in the new world. He knew of a pool residing far away in the regions of the world. It was a large pool surrounded by massive trees. Each tree was bent over in such a way that it created a canopy so that nothing could disturb it. The Holy One gave one command:

"Of all the waters in the world you may drink, but do not drink from the glowing pool." Every creature knew this.

The unicorn knew that he had to be careful with his trickery. So in order to make his plan a success, he changed himself into an old stallion. His horn and wings disappeared, his radiant mane was now a shaggy mess, hanging along his neck and face; and his white skin was now a combination of muddy brown dappled with a few spots of white. Walking through the land, he first came upon a sparrow; and birds, as the unicorn had learned, were of easy persuasion.

The sparrow was washing up in a stream of water as the ruse took place.

"Good day, sparrow," said the stallion, "What are you doing?"

“Oh hello,” said the sparrow, surprised by the greeting, “I’m just washing up. A bird can’t keep too clean.”

“Certainly,” the stallion said with little concern, “But why wash from water that is unclean in itself? There are better places you know.”

The sparrow hopped out of the water as if it had been washing up in dirt. With such an action the stallion could hardly retain a grin: for if it was that simple to get the bird to jump from the water, then causing him and the others to sin would be effortless.

“Do not fret, my dear friend,” replied the stallion, “I know of water that is pure. Just follow me and I will show you.”

The sparrow did so and within a few hours they were at the pool surrounded by the bowing trees. The old stallion and the sparrow passed in between the trees and there was the pool. From the pool came a slight radiance of light. It would pulsate after a few seconds to reveal another luminous flare. The sight of it flabbergasted the bird. The sparrow was hesitant to move; for he knew that the Holy One commanded that no one should taste or touch the glowing pool.

“I don’t think I should be here,” he said nervously, “God has told all to stay clear. If I touch the water, God will surely be angry?”

“Will He?” asked the stallion, “Do you know that to worship God one must know what it is to be God? That water will make you as gods: knowing what is good and knowing what is evil.”

Letting the temptation take root, the sparrow flew over and waded in the water. The water was cool and refreshing over the sparrow’s feathers. The old stallion, seeing the first phase of the plan complete, went to finish it all.

“Taste.” commanded the stallion.

“I’m sure that I shouldn’t do that.”

“God has not hurt you, taste it.”

The bird took a moment to look down into the water, wondering if it was right to drink. The horse continued to tempt him, and finding the water pleasing to his flesh and his eye, the bird took a sip. Quickly he took a deeper gulp and looked at the stallion with glee.

“Are you pleased as I am.” said the stallion.

“Yes!” said the sparrow, flapping his wings, “This is the best water I’ve tasted. Will you try some.”

“I had some before I met you,” he said lying, “We should tell others, should we not?”

The bird concurred.

“Go, tell you friends. Tell the eagles, the robins, the hawks, and the others. Tell them and send them to the other creatures so they can taste the glowing pool.”

The bird did exactly as the old stallion commanded. It took time, but eventually every creature from the largest beast to the smallest was there. The animals crowded around the pool, ascertaining if it was right to be there. The old stallion emerged, proud of his deceptive accomplishment, to speak.

“You have heard from the birds that this water is sweet, that it has power to my you gods” said the stallion, “Tell me great cats, what have you heard?”

A jaguar stepped forward. He stood tall and walked closer to the pool, mesmerized the

anticipation of tasting it.

“I’ve heard that we will know all things.”

“Much more than you know,” the stallion said under his breath, so no one could hear.

“Now taste it, all of you. Taste the sweetness that you all have come for.”

Immediately every creature rushed forward lapping the water into their mouths without conviction or care. The stallion watched joyfully as his lie took effect. There was bickering and hatred aborning in each creature as the glowing pool, now tainted, lost its distinction. The old stallion was oblivious to the others as he slipped away from the scene. Suddenly, every creature felt a sense of worry come over them as a strong wind began to blow.

Most of the creatures tried to hide; for they knew that the Holy One has made his presence known. There was a chilling silence, and then the Holy One spoke.

“The evil that was done, who will take ownership?”

Presently, the jaguar came forward pointing the blame to the leopard; the leopard in turn made haste to place the blame to the bear who had told him. This continued until the small sparrow was confronted.

“Why have you drunk from the pool, which I commanded you not to?” said the Holy One.

Every creature’s hair stood on end. There was a long pause, and then the sparrow spoke up in a shaky voice.

“It- it was the stallions fault,” the sparrow said, “He told me that it was good.”

“Good for what?” replied the Holy One, “to disobey me is never good.”

“God if you had place the pool here we would not have sin,” said the sparrow



The foolish remark engendered the Holy One’s judgment against his creations.

“Was there not other water holes for you to drink from? The curse of sin is yours; for you have chosen it unto your children’s children. Your fur that was once a grand covering will be your nakedness; the sky will no longer please you, but burden you with its rain, heat, and snow. You shall work to earn your life; you have chosen what you thought was good, but now is evil to you.”

The Holy One took the pool, and made it a vacuous ditch.

“Just like this pool,” replied God, “your hearts are dry to me, and you will follow your master—but only for a time. Your children will stand against me in that day and in that day there will be mourning and weeping beyond any heard in the world before. In the night they will become chattel until the coming time of my mercy.”

Now during this time, Ivornel turned himself back into his true form. He pranced proudly along the wide open plains with the energy of a young foal, and yet even he could not escape the Lord’s judgment.

“I will crush what you have done. You’re beauty is no more and all that you had is forever lost.”

As time passed their was murder, hatred, strife, jealousy, and all manner of evil thoughts. For Ivornel it was a breeding ground for sin, and he made it his duty to take

advantage. He deceived many countries to hate God; to stand against him on a appointed day, yet the Holy One separated a land Himself. That land is known as Shavron. Ivronel compelled the world to fight against the Holy One. A great multitude of warriors, large and small gathered, around the wicked behemoth in all his arrogance. The Holy One looked down upon the myriad of nations and said, "Depart from me workers of sin into the Night." Behind the unicorn and the multitude, came a sound as if someone was tearing a cloth. The scenery flapped in the breeze as if revealed a different world. Suddenly that was a potent vacuum that began to pull the multitude into this different world. The judgment of God was sealed and swift; and yet, even in His anger, the Holy One would show mercy to the posterity of that sinful multitude. It is here that we begin the Night's Journey.

Chapter 1: Gabriel

This journey begins, simply enough, in an orphanage that is located in a land called the Crosslands. Up on the third floor, down the hall, and in bed number twenty-two sleeps a young rabbit named Gabriel, but his friends called him Gabe for short. Gabriel was a black haired rabbit with a few white spots dappled around his face. The freckle appearance usually left him open to teasing, however, he was always apt to return the gesture with a hostile retort or a cuff upside the head. His ears were long and at the ends they were split in three. He was the oldest of the orphans in the building, so he carried a lot of authority among his younger companions.

On this night, the young hare slowly crept out of bed to awake two of his friends: Tobin, a dog, and Alban, a young tiger. All three went downstairs into the kitchen with the intent for a little mischief.

"We shouldn't be down here," said Tobin nervously, "If Ms. Galestone finds us--"

"She'll only find us if you keep talking," replied Gabriel, covering the dog's mouth, "You can't tell me you don't want a taste of those candies she brought in yesterday."

"You mean the chocolates with the jam inside?" the tiger said as his mouth watered.

"Yes," replied Gabriel, " Now, here's the plan: one of you go over to the counter, bring the box back, and then--"

"Hey how come you're always making one of us do the dirty work?" said Tobin

"Yeah," Alban said concurring, " last week I missed out on dessert because of one of your bright ideas."

"If you wouldn't have taken so long you--- look forget it!" Gabriel said, " Which one of you is going to get the box?"

Alban and Toby folded their arms.

"Want me to go, eh?" the hare said grunting, "Why that's absurd. I'm not putting myself in danger."

"I dare you to do it," Alban said pointing.

"I double dare you!" Gabriel said, not to be outdone by Alban's challenge.

"Oh yeah, well I dare you to- to infinity!" said the tiger.

Just then, the ceiling began to crack and creak. The three stood quietly, listening to the

footsteps. Once the stepping ceased, they returned to the plan.

"That was close," said Tobin "So, Gabe, are you going to do it or not?"

"Nah, he's a chicken," replied Alban.

There were three things Gabriel hated: boiled asparagus for dinner, going to bed early; and lastly, he loathed being called a coward. Gabriel gave Alban an icy look.

"You're such a pain," said Gabriel.

"And you're a chicken," Alban said.



The tiger and dog flapped their arms wildly and made clucking noises.

"BE QUIET! YOU'LL WAKE HER UP!" said Gabriel in a harsh whisper.

Gabriel stood idle for a moment, and then he made his way over to the counter. Before, the counter seemed closer; but now, since his anxiety was taking over, the table seemed to draw further away from him. He was quiet as a mouse, but with every step the floor squeaked, which made the hare even more unnerved than before. He stopped just a few paces away from the counter to see if his friends were still there. They were, giving him the encouragement he needed to finish the journey. Gabriel grabbed the box, opened it and took a bite of one of the sweets.

"Delicious," the hare said, licking his fingers.

He turned around to head back when he made a eerie discovery: Tobin and Alban were gone.

"W- What?" said Gabriel, looking around. "Where did they go?"

"They?" said a familiar voice. "Who are they, Gabriel?"

Gabriel turned around, hoping that whom ever was behind him really wasn't there, but his fears were answered as the giant panda looked down on him. Ms. Galestone was a plump panda. She was wearing her favorite nightly cloak, which made her look plumper than usually.

"How did you- I didn't hear--"

"I have my ways," she said with a smile. "What are you doing with that box?"

"What box?" Gabriel said putting it behind his back quickly. "You're--You're seeing things."

"Lying!" she shouted, "I taught you better than that."

"I'm a slow learning," he replied rolling his eyes.

"Enough of your foolishness. Put the box back and get upstairs. We'll discuss your punishment in the morning."

The black hare returned to bed, mildly dismayed from the reproach. In the morning, Gabriel and the other orphans were dressed in their fancy cloaks and stood in front of their beds awaiting an appointed inspection. Gabriel walked over to Tobin and Alban.

"Some friends you are. Couldn't give me a warning?"

"We tried," said Tobin, " but you didn't turn around."

"So you ran!"

"What would you have done?" replied Alban.

Gabriel thought for a moment and with a smile he said,

"Ran."

All talking came to a halt when Ms. Galestone came into the room. She was wearing a long maroon cloak and she held a long stick under her arm. She walked down the middle of the room, and as she did she would say things like: "Button that top button" or "Straighten that collar out." When she came upon Gabriel she only glowered. Gabriel gave her a sleazy grin

"We still have that business of last night to talk about," she said ignoring Gabriel's expression. "You will be in my office after breakfast. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am." the hare said, lowering his head.

After breakfast and before he went into the office, he plucked a daffodil from the garden in order to appease Ms. Galestone's anger. He took a deep breath and went inside.

Immediately he presented the flower to her, and without even looking at it, she crushed the flower in her bare hand, tossing it to the floor. Gabriel tugged at his tight collar, knowing he was in for a brutal chastisement. Ms. Galestone was fumbling with some papers as she spoke.

"I was prepared to punish you for that raid last night, but I won't."

"YES!" he said jumping in the air.

However upon seeing the panda's vacant look, Gabriel sat down and once again provided his infamous sleazy grin.

"I'm not going to punish you because something has come up," replied Ms. Galestone. "The law in the Crosslands states that an orphan upon the age of fourteen must leave the welfare of the orphanage to learn a trade."

Gabriel was nervous. He tried to change the subject.

"Have I ever told you that you look smashing in that dress, ma'am."

"No, but I've heard you've called me an overgrown rat."

"Oh please," Gabriel said, trying to dispel the truth of his words, "you can't believe everything you hear."

The panda rose from her seat.

"That's not the point. I have arranged an apprenticeship for you with Mr. Wilford, the local tax collector. You will be leaving bright and early tomorrow."

"I don't want to be a tax collector," replied Gabriel.

"You should be thankful. Once you learn how it's done you'll be very prosperous. Now go upstairs and begin packing your things."

The rest of the day Gabriel moaned and complained about the turn of events. A punishment would have been better than leaving the only home he knew. The night came quickly and Gabriel found it hard to sleep. Tobin and Alban came over to his bedside.

"Get some sleep," said Alban.

"Can't."

"Why?" said Tobin

"I'm being sent away," Gabriel said sitting up. "The stupid law says I have to go and learn to be a stupid tax collector."

"So that's what you've been mopping about," said the dog, "Hey, I thought tax collectors were pretty smart."

"Yeah, it doesn't sound too bad," replied Alban.

"Not too bad?" cried Gabriel.

The hare's voice stirred some of the other children in their sleep. He lowered his voice as he continued.

"It's horrible. Last week one of them was nearly hit by a chair, and a few days ago one was thrown from a window. I don't know about you, but I'm too young to die. I not going."

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Tobin.

A perky grin came over Gabriel's face.

"I'm going to live an adventure. I'm going to travel the world and make lots of money too! I'll figure out a way to trick Ms. Galestone and make my way to Giliga."

"Giliga!" said Alban, " That's far from here."

"Yeah, but its worth it. In that city, I will be able to find some kind of adventure. I know,"

Gabriel said snapping his fingers, "I'll join the Crossland navy- you've seen them all dress up in uniform, I'll travel by sea. It'll be great."

"Are you old enough for that?" asked the dog.

"Ah, I'm sure I am. That's the plan. Tomorrow my adventure begins."

Chapter 2: The Street-Grub

The next day, Gabriel got up eagerly, hoping to leave as soon as possible. Downstairs Ms. Galestone awaited him. The rabbit showed himself cheerful, which caught the panda a little off guard.

"A change of heart, I see?" she said descreying the hare's smile.

"You have no idea. I'm ready. However, could I make a request?"

The panda allowed him to go on.

"I would like to go by myself," Gabriel said. " I can handle going to Mr. Wilford on my own. You can just give me the address."

"No," she said sternly, "Nice try, but your slyness won't work this time."

"Wait a second," the hare said, " you told me its time to learn a trade; to be productive and all that stuff. If I can't even be trusted to travel from here to the next block, then how can I truly be a decent citizen of the Crosslands?"

Ms. Galestone's will, although impossible to penetrate when fixed, was breached by the hare's argument.

"I have to admit you do have a way with words." she said, musing over her decision. "

Fine, all you have to do is take that road and you'll run into Mr. Wilford. Look at you- all dress up and ready to be productive. I'm so proud of you."

The panda proceeded to take one side of Gabriel's face and squeezed it.

"Ouch! So am I," he said rubbing his face.



After she had given Gabriel as few more words of wisdom, the hare walked out of sight from the orphanage to start his so-called adventure. Gabriel could see his former caregiver waving him on. He waited until she was out of sight to change his route and took the road to Giliga. Two months went by and Gabriel quickly learned how to survive on the streets. This was not his desire, but once he found out that the navy did not accept creatures of his age, he was forced to find other means of survival. He became what most

creatures in the Crosslands called a street-grub. Street-grubs were notorious for stealing, and some would even harm others to get what they wanted. It was here that Gabriel learned the crooked trade and it was in Giliga where the grubs did their most underhanded deeds. Most of the time Gabriel would resort to pick-pocketing any creature he thought had something of value, which he would sell later. However, on this day everything was going to change for him.

Recently at the port a ship had docked, which meant that there was always plenty of opportunity to grab a trinket of value from an unsuspecting visitor. Gabriel made his way closer to the ship, swiping an apple to appease his morning hunger.

He hid behind a large crate as he watched all the passengers get off. The first was a old mongoose who looked fairly wealthy, but Gabriel held his composure until he saw all the possibilities. Halfway through came a flamboyantly dressed poodle. She was laced in the finest cloak and gems of all colors that garnished her from head to her foot. Gabriel thought he had found his victim; but once he saw that the poodle traveled with two bodyguards, he quickly relinquished the idea. Lastly came a white rabbit that traveled alone. He was wearing a black coat, carrying a regular bag of clothes, and over his shoulder was a hefty bag of money. From Gabriel's perspective, this passenger the biggest sucker he had seen in his life; and when the hare left the boat with a whistle for his tune, Gabriel started to giggle: for it was time to work this creature over. Gabriel brushed the dirt from his coat to make himself look presentable and followed the rabbit from afar. Gabriel was sizing up the rabbit: he was about his height, middle aged, and looked to be wise in some aspects. The rabbit went over to a gift stand. Upon buying one of the products the rabbit placed his bag of money on the ground, which one should never do. Gabriel couldn't believe his eyes.

"This one is too easy," he said with glee.

Gabriel sashayed over to the money bag, but before he could lay claim on it, the white rabbit took up his bag just before Gabriel could get his hands on it.

"Maybe not so easy." he said disappointed.

But this minor setback did not stop him. When the rabbit turned to leave, Gabriel tapped him on the shoulder and introduced himself.

"Good morning, dear hare, my name is Gabriel. Welcome to Giliga, may I be the first to offer any hospitality I can. What is your name so I might not be rude?"

"My name is Gideon. I'm a Shavronite. Thank you for the warm welcome I—"

"Wait," Gabriel said interrupting, "You're the one who slewed a thousand leopards! I heard many stories about you."

"Seems my reputation proceeds me," Gideon said bobbing his head with a big smile.

"But it was the Holy One that—"

Gabriel took a bow. Gideon was mortified by the act and told the hare to stand up.

"Look, I want to take you up on some of that hospitality. I need a guide to take me to a small village here in the Crosslands."

Gabriel stood straight as a rod, gave Gideon a salute, and offered his services.

"You look too young to be a guide."

"I will have you to know that I'm old enough to make a living and secondly—"

"All right," Gideon replied, "I didn't mean to offend. Do you know how to get to

Holfstead?"

"I sure do."

"Then lead on."

The two rabbits went through the streets until they turned onto an old beaten path, which proceeded into a wood. The trees were dense and hardly any sunlight was able to penetrate through the canopy. Gabriel lead most of the way, until he pretended to drop something in order to position himself behind Gideon.

"Now make a left around that tree and the road to Holfstead will be there."

Gideon did exactly as he was told, but instead of a path, he was facing a boulder covered with vines.

"This is a dead end. You've made a mistake."

"Its no mistake," Gabriel said pulling a dagger. "Now be ever so kind and throw your bags, especially the money, over here so I take a gander at them."

Gideon yelled for help. Gabriel waited until he was done.

"Are you finished? Now throw the bags over or I'll kill you where you stand."

Gideon complied. Gabriel went through the garment bag, keeping his eyes on Gideon as he did so. The bag had a few jackets, and when Gabriel saw a new white jacket, he immediately took favor over it. He took off his old jacket, revealing a dingy shirt underneath, and modeled his new coat.

"This is nice- real nice," Gabriel said looking himself over. "I'll keep it. You can have the medallion you brought. Oh, there something else I've been looking at. That crest around your neck, give it here!"

"You have enough. Now leave me alone!" shouted Gideon.

Gabriel rushed over and pressed the dagger to his throat.

"I said give me that-"

Before he could finish Gideon pushed Gabriel to the ground. The dagger fell away, however, the black hare's attempt to retrieve it was cut short when Gideon kicked it out of reach. Punches were thrown and Gideon's skill as a fighter proved to be the deciding factor, but Gideon was an honorable warrior. His pity for the black hare, although a worthy gesture, was not the wisest thing to do. Gabriel started to cry.

"It just a lesson that you have to learn. Unfortunately, I'll have to turn you into the authorities."

Gideon came over to grab Gabriel. While he was down he took a handful of dirt, tossed it into Gideon's eyes, and with two punches the white rabbit went down.

"When I want something," he said cutting the crest from Gideon neck, "I take it."

Gideon quickly came out of his stupor. His vision was blurry, but he could see that the black rabbit stood above him. With a sinister smile, Gabriel kicked Gideon in the face and left him there alone in the wood.

Chapter 3: Words of Warning

Deborah waited anxiously at the window for Gideon. She was expecting him an hour before hand, but there was no sign of him. Her new home presented her with the comforts

she needed that Shavron was unwilling to relinquish to her. The wickedness in Shavron was on the rise: idolatry had high precedence, even going as far as live sacrifices; acknowledging the Holy One was a distant memory, and every home had a god of wood or stone to worship in its window sill. Deborah was not the only judge to leave the country, for Gideon and Tiber followed her example. Despite the distance between the Crosslands and Shavron, the three still held to their duty as the judges, although when God prompted them to return to Shavron to address the Shavronites, they did not adhere to His words.

There were two visitors in her home, who were relaxing and speaking over the present issues over a game of chess. Samson sat calmly over his white pieces as Tiber studied the board, contemplating his next move. While waiting, the wolf gave the judge of commerce some sound advice.

"Now, you must be adroit- keen if you will-when you negotiating deals with Calus. They will steal your money right from under your nose if you're not careful. Oh by the way, I'll be taking your knight."

Tiber let out a deep sigh, showing his frustration over the game.

"Thank you for the advice, I could use some for the game as well, " Tiber said rubbing his jaw. "Being the judge of commerce is a challenge, but it's better than stealing. Just last week I nearly lost half the cargo of wheat in that storm. I should have listened to the captain. I shouldn't have pressed him."

"Don't dwell on the past," replied the wolf. "Learn and move on. And I going to teach you a good lesson right now by taking your rook- pay attention."

Tiber banged his hand on the table. Samson laughed and addressed Deborah.

"Deborah, are you sure Gideon is coming?"

"I got a letter from him over a month ago saying he would be here in time for my birthday," she said looking out the window.

"I hope he makes it," Tiber said touching his knight, "We really don't get to see each other as often as we use to. He better hurry up the night his coming, and that's not a good time for a rabbit to be out," he said beginning to move his knight.

Samson made an expression which changed Tiber's mind for moving the piece. The hare grabbed his pawn, moved it, and Samson took one of Tiber's bishops. The hare accused him of cheating.

"I'm not cheating, you're just bad at this game," replied the wolf with a smile.

"I am not bad at this game," he replied, " I keep losing my concentration because of your missing eyeballs. Ask the Lord to give you some new ones ,will you? it freaks me out!"

"By the way, checkmate," Samson said.

Deborah came from the window and took a seat. Samson had a grin on his face.

"How old are you again?" asked Samson.

"Thirty- nine," she replied.

"Add three score and you get her real age," Tiber said laughing.

"Oh, be quiet," she said, giving him a playful swat.



Suddenly there came a knock from the door. When she opened it, Gideon was leaning up against the door post ready to pass out. His right eye was swollen black, his lip was cut,

and his clothes were dingy. Deborah went to help him, but Gideon propped himself up and stood up straight.

"I'm perfectly fine," he said pulling on his coat. "I've gotten into scuffles before. I don't need any help."

Gideon went to walk, but found it as easy as a infant does in taking their first steps. He fell into Deborah's arms. Samson and Tiber rushed over to help.

"Who has done this?" Tiber asked, "Gideon, all you have to do is speak the criminal's name and I'll have the entire county on alarm."

"He'll answer our questions soon enough," said Deborah. "Tiber, go to the well and bring some water. Samson, there are some bandages in the cupboard."

Gideon sat down at the table. Deborah knelt beside him.

"Here's your present," Gideon said with a half-hearted smile, "I got it from the gift stand, but the poem is my idea."

"Thank you," she said.

"I was—"

"Mugged," Deborah said cutting him short, "The Crosslands have been infested with criminals. The officials call them street-grubs for short."

Samson and Tiber came back. Deborah told them the details.

"What is the name of the perpetrator?" asked Samson.

"Gabriel," Gideon said taking a deep breath, "His name was Gabriel. I'll talk to the authorities tomorrow."

During the early morning, Samson found it hard to sleep. He got up and began to pace the dining room. He was bogged down by something that was on his heart, and for an hour or so he walked silently, until the Holy One spoke to him,

"Go outside a to the apple tree."

Samson complied and within a few moments the apple tree was there.

"Look up, the apples ready for harvest. Pull three of them." replied the Holy One.

Samson did so.

"Place them on the ground and watch."

As Samson carried out the command, all three apples began to rot and fester until they became worthless.

"What does this mean?" asked Samson.

"My judges have not obeyed my voice. They have seen the wickedness in Shavron that is beyond any other nation in existence. I have spoken to all three to return to the land and fight for righteousness, but they treat me with contempt by hiding in other lands."

"Yes they have Lord," said Samson.

"And my prophet lacks the courage to tell them so."

The wolf lowered his head in shame.

"Listen to me," said the Holy One, "just like the apples, the hearts of the judges are festering. Go to them and tell them of their sin, if they will obey me and repent, warning the Shavronites of their wickedness, then my judgment over them I will forget. However, if the judges will continue in disobedience and if you refuse to speak my words, then my wrath will be upon all four of you and Shavron."

Samson wasted no time returning to Deborah's home. He woke up all three judges and repeated the words of God to them.

"We have all wronged God by not listening to him," said Samson, "God wants us to return to Shavron to warn them to repent from the wickedness they do, but first we have to repent for what we have done."

Tiber, Deborah, and Gideon knew that God was speaking through Samson. They had, when God called them to stand up against the depravity in the land, counted the words of the Holy One as trifling.

"Well, I'm going to ask God to forgive me now, what are you going to do?"

Tiber and Deborah were not hesitant to obey, but Gideon turned his back; for pride was taking form in his heart.

"Gideon, don't do this," said Samson. "You know God has dealt with you. Running from Shavron was wrong; ignoring the voice of God was too."

"I don't *want* to go back to Shavron!" yelled Gideon.

Samson walked over, knelt down so that his eyes were level with the hare's and said, "What you want to do is irrelevant. Are you going to obey God now or ignore him again?"

Repentance was made by all four, and God forgave them.

Chapter 4: To the Courthouse

The next day Gideon, along with his friends, went to the court of Giliga to report the assault. They approached the front desk being attended by a cat. He was fumbling with his small eyeglasses as he looked over the court records. He paid no attention to the four creatures in front of him, and if Samson hadn't tapped on the desk, they would have been standing there all day.

"Oh, hello there!" replied the cat, started from the knock. "How may I help you?"

Gideon quickly summed up the events.

"You said he had ears that were flared at the ends?" asked the cat

"Yes, at the top in three," replied Gideon.

"I have heard that just last night the Crossland Guard caught a street-grub that fits that description," the cat said flipping through the court records. "I'll let the judge know of your situation. You can sit in on the proceedings--courtroom five on the left."

Inside the courtroom, the four sat down in the front row. A hyena, wearing a brown cloak and read sash to signify his appointed duty, brought the room to attention with an involuntary giggle, as the judge entered the courtroom. An old Indian elephant came in languidly with a gorgeous drapery over his back. His tusks were capped in gold to honor his title, and after getting himself positioned behind his desk, he told the court to take their seats



"Let us begin," stated the judge, "Bring in the first accused."

The black hare came in chained by the arms. He gave the two guards, escorting him, a

hard time, and he didn't stop until he was cuffed upside the head for his efforts.

"Is that him?," Tiber said to Gideon. "You let a kid beat you up?"

"He fought dirty," Gideon said in his defense.

The elephant looked down on the Gabriel with little regard for his age.

"Gabriel of Alur, age fourteen, I have some interesting news about you," replied the judge, "It seems that you should have been in the care of a Mr. Wilford. Does that surprise you?"

"Just as much as how fat you are!" shouted Gabriel.

A hush came over the courtroom. One of the guards popped Gabriel on the head again.

"The- the impudence!" said the elephant nearly coming to faint. "Is the victim of the crime here?"

"Yes," Gideon said, coming forward.

Gabriel gave Gideon a dirty look and spat at his feet. This time both guards cuffed him upside the head. The judge addressed Gideon.

"Is this the young hare who you encounter yesterday, and in your weakness, beat you up?"

"Hey, I'm not weak. I put up a good fight until he got dirty." said Gideon.

"The court's time is very precious a simple answer will suffice. Did he or did he not beat you down?"

"Well-- yes," exclaimed Gideon reluctantly.

"You may take your seat," said the judge, "Now," he said returning his glare back at Gabriel, "young hare you have disrespected this court and are found guilty under the law. Have you nothing to say in your defense?"

Gabriel stuck out his tongue.

"Your abysmal behavior will carry a heavy price," the elephant said taking his gavel with his trunk. "Tomorrow at noon, you will receive a public flogging of fifty lashes!"

The elephant took his trunk and struck the table with his gavel. The young hare left the courtroom kicking and screaming. There was a sense of pity over Gideon's face as Gabriel was taken from the courtroom.

"It was a hard sentence, but justice is served," replied Samson.

"Satisfied, Gideon?" said Tiber.

"Actually I'm not," said Gideon.

Gideon ran up to the judge's table.

"Are you sure that a flogging is appropriate?" asked Gideon, "I've seen a bear nearly crippled once by only thirty lashes."

"Don't have sympathy for him," said the judge, "Examples must be made especially for the likes of him. The nerve of calling me fat-- I should have hanged him. Anyway, I have two other cases. So if you please- "

"The punishment doesn't fit the crime," said Gideon interrupting, "Beating a rabbit to death is not a fair ruling."

"A criminal is a mystery, as much a mystery as why creatures like you walk on two legs while creatures like me walk on all fours. He is scum and deserves what's coming to him. I respect your kind heart, but this is my courtroom."

Gideon left the table, but he still couldn't get over the ruling. Outside the four made their

way back to Holfstead, but Gideon murmured about the court's decision.

"Gideon, if it makes you feel better try talking to the judge after the court closes," said Deborah.

"When?"

"At five," she said, "but remember we leave tomorrow for Shavron."

"I know, I won't be long. I'll see you before dinner."

Gideon stayed by the courtroom as his friends left. Five o'clock came quickly, and when the elephant came out after a hard days work, Gideon wasted no time in accentuating his point.

"Hey, I want a different ruling," Gideon said.

"Uh, not you again. Why are you pestering me?"

"You know why. We both know a flogging will kill him."

The elephant, continuing his causal stroll, paying Gideon no mind; and if he could would have wipe the thought of him from his mind.

"Look, elephant, I'm talking to you!"

The judge swung his huge head towards Gideon. His body nearly knocked down a few bystanders.

"First of all my name is Baz," the elephant said, pointing his trunk at Gideon's face,

"Secondly, I should have you arrested for badgering me."

"Give me two minutes to explain."

"No."

Baz wrapped his trunk around Gideon's ears, lifted him up, and placed him to the side.

The hare ran back in front of him.

"Come on, there has to be another way," replied Gideon.

The elephant thought for a moment and let out a long sigh.

"There is another way-- banishment."

"Sounds kind of harsh."

"Look," Baz said angrily, "Those are the choices. I have said enough!"

"Can I at least tell Gabriel of the changing circumstances?"

"The courthouse has a jail in the basement," Baz said giving the hare direction with his trunk, "You have to go to the back to get in. The jailer will show you the young hare and he may have some of your belongings."

Gideon turned to walk away, but Baz had one more thing to say to him.

"How long will you be in the Crosslands?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Then tomorrow will be a good day," Baz said, rolling his eyes.

Chapter 5: Goodbye to the Crosslands

Gideon entered the jail. The jailer, a black dog, handed him a bag. Inside were his crest and some money. Most of the money was spent on vain pleasures oblivious to the hare, and Gideon was a little upset by the lost; however, understanding that his life could have been lost, he quickly praised God for his mercy. The jailer took the hare down a corridor of cells. Gabriel was at the last cell on the left. He was sitting in the corner with his back

turned.

“Five minutes,” replied the jailer.

Gideon called out to the young hare, and after taking a sweeping glance, Gabriel returned to his solitary world of abjection.

“I- I know I’m the last creature you want to see,” said Gideon hesitantly.

Gabriel did not reply.

“I talked to the judge,” Gideon said trying to get Gabriel's attention, “He has changed your verdict.”

This got Gabriel’s attention. He got up from his seat and stood, waiting for Gideon’s next words.

“This is your choice, and I would take it if I were you, instead of the fifty lashes,” he said in a shaky voice, “You’ll be banished from the Crosslands.”

Gabriel plopped down in his seat, flabbergasted from the changing event.

“B-Banishment!” Gabriel said rolling his eyes, “Some help you are! I thought for a moment that you got me off the hook. Now I’m a worse position than before. Get lost and stay lost.”

“Fine. If you want a taste of fifty lashes upon your back, then you can have it,” replied Gideon sternly, “You’re going to die tomorrow. Think about that as you sleep.”

Gabriel didn’t have to sleep, he was thinking about the punishment every second since he left the courtroom. Despite his overall dislike of Gideon, Gabriel knew he was right.

There was no way to avoid the inevitable unless he took Baz's secondary ruling. Gideon was leaving when Gabriel called out to him.

“All right, I’ll leave the Crosslands, but where will I go? Who will hire me to work? I have no skills.”

Gideon took a deep sigh. The Lord was working on his heart the very moment the verdict was given. It was something Gideon did not want to do, but obedience to God isn’t always easy, but it is right and pleasing to Him. Gideon made a quick glance up to the ceiling and utter the words he thought he would never say.

“You can stay with me for awhile,” Gideon said dropping his head slowly, “I’ll teach you what I can to make a living. You’ll learn the way of the sword, and the way of God too.”

Gabriel didn’t like the proposal about God, but under the present circumstances, he had no choice but to submit.

“Fine, but I don’t want any rules put on me. I come and go as I please, go it?”

“Are those the conditions?” asked Gideon.

“Yeah!” Gabriel said bobbing his head.

“Then you can stay here,” replied Gideon stepping away, “I not having a reprobate in my home. Good night, Gabriel.”

Gideon walked down the corridor, but took small steps; for he knew the urgency of aid would overcome the hares belligerent attitude. Gabriel did as Gideon had thought: the black hare called out to him again in anguish. Gideon came back; Gabriel gritted his teeth.

“You’ve changed your mind,” Gideon replied with a big grin, “I’ll be back tomorrow, enjoy your stay.”



It was raining the next day. All the paper work was finalized, renouncing Gabriel's citizenship from the Crosslands. Two guards brought him to the dock as Gideon, and the others, waited. He saw that the young hare was chained by the arms. The guards went to unlock him; but Gideon saw in Gabriel's eyes that once the chains were removed he was going to make a run for it. Gideon told the guards to throw him the key. Gabriel was irate.

"Unchain me, UNCHAIN ME!"

"I'll do it when we're out to sea," stated Gideon.

Gabriel marched on board, hating Gideon even now more than ever. Gideon looked to heaven and gave a short prayer.

"God, you wanted me to do this. I don't understand it--I really don't understand it, but you're going to have to deal with that rabbit."

Once the boat pulled from the port, Gideon unchained Gabriel. Gabriel did not thank Gideon for keeping his word. The young hare watched the coast of his home disappear over the rainy back drop, lost in his own dreams of the coming days.

"You may want to head below deck, you'll be soaked and wet if you don't," said Gideon.

"Leave me alone," replied Gabriel.

"Well, once you get tired your cabin number is eleven. Don't be down. You should count your blessings-- better the ship than the whip. Think of this as an adventure."

Gabriel rolled his eyes from the irony. The young hare stayed in his state of depression as the captain and crew made preparations for the heavy rain.

Chapter 6: Ulice the Despot

Returning to Shavron wasn't easy for the judges. Their willful absence had made the Shavronites indifferent to them. Without the judges presence it left Shavron open to any creature of weak character to take over, and that creature was a skunk named Ulice. He had risen in power of the past ten years and had lived through the tyranny of Jezerah and Iya. He was abrasive when confronted, deceptive when he was in trouble, and when it came to God he had the worst trait of all: apathy. He allowed all manner of wickedness to breed in Shavron, but all the sin stunk in the Holy One's nostrils, but one sin in particular brought sorrow to God's heart to which he told Samson as the wolf prayed:

It grieves me that I have established Shavron for they are a disobedient land. They have cast me off in the days of Iya and Jezerah and when I sought them to bring them back to goodness, they turn from Me again. All manner of sin dwells here, but above all that angers me is this: they sacrifice their own children to please Iya's moon god---I hate it above all! I will destroy Shavron and make their name vanish.

"But what of your mercy Lord?" said Samson, "I was once wicked and you forgave me, and even when the judges failed to do their duty, did you not forgive that wrong? You are a gracious God whose mercies are renewed daily. And what will other nations say: The Lord made this land only to destroy it. Let it not be so, God. Have mercy on Shavron."

The Lord replied to Samson.

“Go to Ulice and bring My words to him: Your sin is great and I the Lord am ready to judge this land, but if you would humble yourself and pray I will not bring the judgment I plan on doing. You sacrifice your children and you allow the ways of the witch, Iya, to still live among you. I will take your children and leave you with no offspring, but if you will repent of this evil and turn away from it, I will not do such a thing.”

The next morning Samson explained all that the Holy One told him.

“I don’t feel comfortable with this Samson?” said Deborah. “Will the Holy One really do that?”

“I didn’t ask him,” said Samson, “I just listened.”

“When are we going to see Ulice?” asked Gideon.

“Today.” said Samson leading out.

Ulice himself wasn’t expecting anything troublesome today. In fact he revel in the fact that he would have time to spend with his two sons (twins) Tip and Top. With the death of their mother in childbirth it was Ulice’s priority to fill that void for his sons by catering to their ever need: if they wanted toys they got it; if they wanted parties they received it. All of this, although good hearted in sense, lead the young skunks to become what we call in our world spoiled brats---and that is what they were. Nevertheless Ulice loved his sons and today he was taking them on a picnic. Everything was in place and Ulice called for his sons, but a servant came to him bring a hint of bad news.

“Sir, the judges are here to see you?”

“Who?” said Ulice unconcerned with the matter.

“The Judges of Shavron, the prophet Samson and a young rabbit is with them.”

Ulice showed his discontent by pushing the picnic basket to the side. His servant backed away knowing that the skunk was prone to throw objects at this point of irritation.

“I don’t have time for this!” he said, “My sons and I are going on a picnic. Tell those deserters to come back tomorrow.”

The servant obeyed his master, but returned quickly with this response.

“They said that it is important--a matter of great distress.”

“Distress!?” was Ulice’s reply, “What presume is the distress?”

“The judgment of God.”

Ulice started laughing.

“Oh please!” he said waving his hands, “Send them away, send them away!”

The servant went to carry out the deed, returned again within one minute.

“Sir, Samson the prophet said that he will not leave until he speaks with you face to face; and if not, he will sit on your porch and howl day and night until you go mad.”

“WHAT!?!?” shouted Ulice, “I’m the ruler in Shavron. What right does that wolf have to stand at my door and to interrupt my time with my sons. Bring him in here, now!”



The judges came in. Ulice stood straight as a board with arms crossed, eyes narrowed, and his lip tight with rage. Samson took a slight bow to show reverence to the ruler and his home. The wolf started to speak, but Ulice held up his hand.

“Get to the point, Samson, I don’t have a lot of time.”

“So be it,” said Samson. “God is not pleased with the Shavronites and aims to judge the

land by take the children away for he sees the murders of the young to the Iya's moon-god. However if the land will repent and stop this wickedness the Lord will not do what he aims to do."

Ulice rolled his eyes.

"I can't control all the Shavronites, and besides, their not my children why should it concern me?"

"Fine," said Gideon, "You can't control every creature but you can stand for righteousness by putting an end to this."

"He's right," said Tiber.

"Just make a stand, Ulice," said Deborah.

The pleas fell on deaf ears and Ulice unleashed his sharp words against them.

"Let me tell all of you something," he said looking them over, "I don't need a bunch of deserters coming into my home telling me what's right and what's wrong. You've been gone for the past ten years and got the nerve to show up with "thus says the Lord." I not concerned with Iya's moon-god or anything else---just my sons and the picnic," Ulice turned his head, calling both his sons into the room. "As long as my sons are safe, it doesn't matter. So if you all please, get out of my house."

During the evening the Holy One spoke to Samson,

"I will give Ulice time, bring my message again. He will be taking a walk tomorrow. Take him to the open graveyard where the children are buried after the death ceremony, but he harden his heart even then."

Samson returned to Ulice's home alone. Ulice answered the door.

"What do you want now?"

"Going for a walk?" said Samson.

"Yes, how do you know?"

"God. May I join you?"

"I see why not, but keep your prophecies to yourself."

They walked together for sometime. Samson hardly said anything, but when he saw a large statue that was strangely carved he asked Ulice what it was.

"Oh," said the skunk, "that's the idol that the Shavronites worship---the moon-god you mention yesterday.

"I want to go see it," said Samson.

"Interested are we?"

"Hardly, but you may be."

He took Ulice up to the plateau. The statue held a large platform in its hands. It was stained with blood. Samson continued to walk and then suddenly stopped cold.

"Come here, Ulice."

"What for?" said the skunk.

"Get over here," said Samson looking back at him, "and look at this!"

Ulice came over unconcerned at first but when he came over to Samson his insides shook from the terrible sight. An open graveyard about a mile long and half a mile wide held the skulls and burnt bodies of little ones. Indeed a horrid sight! A wicked sight! But Ulice closed his eyes and said,

“What is this to me?”

“You’re the leader of this country.” said Samson in earnest. “You know you have the power to stop this. God hates this and is ready to judge us, but if we stop-----”

“Hold it,” said Ulice, “What is this we business. I not doing this. Go to the Shavronites that are---talk to them.”

“To know to do good and refuse to do it is sin,” said Samson truthfully, “You’ve known about this for far too long and you know that if you talk to this nation they will stop----all God is asking you is to take a stand.”

Now Ulice had the power to do exactly what Samson was saying, but he like being a leader and knew if he spoke up his reign as despot might be transferred to the judges. The graveyard wasn’t enough for the skunk and his bitterness against the judges was deep rooted inside of him. So according to the Holy One’s word, Ulice turned a blind eye to the situation and started to walk away.

“You arrogant---”

“Samson,” said Ulice calmly, “I am done with you. Speak to me no longer. If I want to talk to you, I’ll find you myself.”

“Do you want to lose your children?”

Ulice turned around.

“Is that a threat?”

“I’m only speaking the words that God has given me.”

“Really?” said Ulice smiling slyly. “Well listen to some of my words. You’re going to jail---I think a nice cell will keep you off my back and teach you a lesson about threatening my children.”

Ulice did all that he said and Samson was jailed for two years.

Chapter 7: Two years Later

Over the past two years, Gideon trained Gabriel in the way of the sword. At first Gabriel didn’t like it; but once he became familiar with the blade, he enjoyed it. He also believed that his life was far better around Gideon than being in the streets in the Crosslands, but he never admitted it when Gideon brought it up. Gideon was watching the young protégée as he followed through with a few moves, but Gabriel decided to incorporate some of his own ideas. The movement of the wooden blade became awkward and jittery; he smacked his hand and shook it. Gideon came over dumfounded by his pupils actions.

“I’m amazed, Gabriel.” said Gideon.

The young hare stood proud and tall, waiting for Gideon’s accolades.

“I’m amazed that you still, despite my diligent teaching, are able to forget everything I taught you.”

“Ah, don’t worry,” said Gabriel, “I was just adding my own style to your teaching.”

“Well your style would have cost you a hand. Stick with the basics until you master them.”

Gabriel spent a few more minutes following Gideon as he went through a series of combat moves. As the early morning brought training; mid morning brought a time for breakfast. Before eating Gideon gave thanks over his meal, Gabriel smirked; but not daring to openly mock his teacher.

“You know what today is don’t you?” asked Gabriel to Gideon.

“Not really,” said Gideon. “I know its not your birthday, and from my recollection this day holds no special occasion.”

Gabriel slumped back in his chair, disgruntled by his teacher’s lack of consideration.

“This is two years to the day that you said you would buy me a real sword.”

“With that sloppy display today, I may push it back another two years.”

“You’re mean,” the young hare said, crossing his arms and poking out his bottom lip.

“You know I’m good.”

It was true, Gabriel had shown great improvement not only in his ability to learn, but also his attitude; although, he was not as receptive about God as Gideon hope for, nonetheless, the young hare was growing. Understanding this, Gideon made a compromise.

“I’ll buy you a sword if , and only if, there is a good reason to do so.”

“A good reason for you might never happen.”

“Yup.” said Gideon quickly. “Look, my word is my bond. Besides, I want to visit Samson today. He needs some cheering up.”

Samson was sitting quietly in his jail cell as he usually did. Deborah and Tiber were there when Gideon and Gabriel came in. The white hare immediately saw the sad faces.

“What wrong?” he asked.

“Tell him Samson.” said Deborah.

Samson lifted his head that was down and spoke.

“It going to happen tonight.”

“What? What’s going to happen tonight?” said Gideon.

“The Holy One is going to take the children from Shavron.”

“Does Ulice know about this?”

“He doesn’t care and that’s the problem,” said Samson.

Gabriel leaned over to Gideon.

“Is this a good reason for a sword?”

“A very good reason,” said Gideon.



That night wasn’t different from any other, but the Holy One caused a deep slumber to fall over the land. During that slumber God allowed the threshold of the World of Night to be opened. Suddenly in the open air the blade of a reaper appeared, slicing away the scene as if it was a piece of paper, leaving a large open hole in the air. A cougar step out and quickly carried out the assignment that he was given. He place a silver horn to his lips that had hung by his side and began to play. The music was sublime, yet carried only an attractive lure to the children of Shavron; for the deep slumber in Shavron effected only the grown-ups. Children from all corners of Shavron rose from their beds and ran to the sound in great haste. Thousands upon thousands, stood at the feet of the musician enchanted by his every note. He step into hole with his horn and the children followed him, and then the Holy One sealed the hole and lifted the slumber off of Shavron.

In the morning came a great wailing that was never heard in Shavron before. Samson

shot up from his bed and looked out the cell window. Mothers and fathers searched desperately for their young, calling their names in great distress. There were tears in every eye and anger in every heart, for nearly every Shavronite had a child missing. Ulice immediately went out in the busy streets, demanding to know the reason for the ruckus. Once told, he ran to his sons' room and did not find them. He ran to the kitchen---they were not there. He ran into the backyard----no sign of them. Ulice was terror-stricken. "MY SONS, MY SONS, WHERE ARE THEY??!!"

Under the distress the skunk's mind brought him back to that day with Samson.

"That wolf has done this!" he said gnashing his teeth, "I'll kill! I'll kill him!"

Ulice pushed his way through the crowds and went to the jailhouse. Gideon, Deborah, Gabriel, and Tiber were already there, trying to understand the situation. When Ulice came in he demanded that the cell be opened, when it became ajar, Ulice quickly snatched the lance from the guards hands ran towards Samson, and placed the lance to the wolf's throat. Gideon pulled his blade and was ready to defend his friend, but Samson lifted his hand to stay the rabbit's judgment.

"Where are my sons?" said Ulice, shaking with anger, "TELL ME, YOU FILTH!!"

"Has not the Lord spoken?" said Samson calmly as a trickle of blood flowed down his neck, "Your sons and all the children of Shavron are in a different world now."

"LIAR!" shouted Ulice.

"Am I? You thought that the judgment of God was something to be ignored and when it lingered for two years you counted it as nothing." said Samson strongly." He lingered to give you time, but you chose not, now your children are gone as He had said. You think God will watch the burning of offspring and do nothing about it?"

Ulice pulled the lance back slightly, but did not give Samson much room to move.

"I want my sons," said the skunk, "And you're going to give them to me, now!"

"I can't do something that's out of my power." said Samson.

"Then you'll die for my sons!"

Ulice went to piece Samson through the throat, but Gideon sprung from behind him and slice the lance in half. Samson stumble to the side holding his neck, as Deborah and Tiber assisted him.

My sons----" said Ulice in disarray.

Let me inquire of the Lord," said Samson standing straight again. " He will tell us what to do.

Ulice reluctantly agreed, leaving the jailhouse into the open streets where the Shavronites were mourning for their young. During the night Samson prayed saying,

"Lord you have heard the tears of the Shavronites. You are merciful and you will not punish the innocent for the guilty. Let me ask: if there are fifty in Shavron who will admit their sins, will you not give the children back?"

"*For fifty I will.*" said the Lord.

"Let your prophet speak again," said Samson. "Clearly if fifty can repent certainly you will not hold back you mercy if only forty will confess?"

"*For forty I will forgive the Shavronites.*" said the Holy One.

Samson spoke again.

“What about thirty, my Lord, will you forgive for thirty?”

“Yes, even for thirty.”

“Please let me speak again,” said the wolf, “If there be twenty in Shavron who will turn for following Iya’s moon-god, will you return the children?”

“For twenty I will.” said the Holy One.

“One last time, my Lord, and I will address issue this no longer.” said Samson beseeching the Holy One, “If there are ten---only ten---will you lift you hand of judgment?”

The Lord spoke,

“If there be ten--even one soul who will turn from the wicked ways of Iya, I will restore Shavron’s posterity. I will do it by opening the world of night again. Bring all of the Shavronites to Tribless Hill by tomorrow’s evening. Give the message to Ulice.”

The message was relayed to Ulice who did everything in his power to make sure the message reached ever ear in Shavron. Messengers were sent throughout the land to beckon all the Shavronites to Tribless Hill. Word spread quickly and by evening the entire land was standing before the judges and Samson.

“I never seen so many creatures in one place.” said Gabriel to Gideon overwhelmed by the sight.

Ulice made his way up the hill.

“O.k.” he said balling up his fist, “What now?”

The Lord touched Samson’s mouth and when he spoke ever ear heard him clearly.

“The Holy One says this: you have angered me--even sickened me by the sacrifice of your offspring. I have taken you children to protect them from you wicked devices, but if you will humble yourselves and pray I will restore the posterity of Shavron. But if you chose to continue in murder, your children you will see no more.”

A great sound of wailing spreading throughout the multitude. Ulice flung his hand into the air.

“Nothing but threats! God threatens us!”

“He commands you.” said Samson. “What will you do?”

Ulice crossed his arms.

“I will not be brought out in the open and blackmailed in anyway---I’m leaving!”

Ulice stormed through the multitude. When the Shavronites saw that their leader was leaving, they did the same. The judges watched as the whole land turned away from Tribless Hill and thereby turning away from God.

“Not even one?” said Samson quietly, “Not one?”

The prophet was about to give up, when he saw something walking up the hill. It crept slowly up the hill ; and reaching the top, it wiped its brow from the effort.

“A mouse.” said Gideon.

The mouse looked up into the judges eyes--every one of them. He started to speak, but his small voice could not be heard until all of them dropped to one knee.

“I am Tintoretto.” said the old mouse. “I was listening in the crowd.”

“And?” said Samson.



The old mouse wipe a little tear from his eye that hardly could be seen and said, "I have sinned against God. Granted none of my children were sacrificed to that idol, but one of my grandchildren were; and when I had opportunity to prevent it," said the mouse crying, "I turned a blind eye. Lord, forgive me for my disobedience for my cowardly act and my indifference to sin."

The old mouse cried bitterly. Deborah torn a piece of his cloak off and gave it to the mouse.

"Thank you," he said wiping his eyes.

"Well God," said Samson looking around, "That's one."

Suddenly from behind them, as if a great veil had been torn, the world of night appeared. In the distance was a nightly world enveloped in a hue of ash. Everyone retreated some distance fearful from the sight.

"Remarkable," said Samson.

"Glorious" remarked Gideon.

"Magnificent." said Deborah.

"Outstanding."

"Weird," said Gabriel. "Very, very weird."

The Holy One spoke to them as they inched forward again.

"Be not afraid. I have seen the turn of the Shavronites from me---they are stubborn and uncaring! Yet their offspring that I have taken I will return for the sake of my glory and the repentance of the old mouse, Tintoretto, that all may know that if one repents then I will be merciful. I will choose a king to rule in Shavron. The king will rule over this generation and will lead them in My ways. Samson, Gideon, and Gabriel enter into the world of night. I will sustain you a show you wonders on your journey."

Now Gabriel never believed in God, but when he heard the voice he barely moved; and when his name was called, he nearly passed out. Gideon came over to help him to walk.

"You o.k.?"

"There's a god?" said Gabriel, "Are you kidding me?"

"No, I've been telling you that for the past two years, and besides He's not a god; He's the only one."

"And he wants me to go in there?" said Gabriel pointing at the scene.

"Yes," said Gideon smiling, "Come on, we've got some kids to save."

Samson went in first and then Gideon and Gabriel. Once they crossed the threshold, the Holy One sealed the entrance again. Deborah, Tiber, and the little old mouse stood at Tribless Hill and prayed for their friends safe journey.

Chapter 8: The World of Night

"Gideon, I'm scared," said Gabriel.

"You're not the only one." Gideon said placing his hand on his sword.

Despite the new world being a bland color, the three newcomers retained their natural colors from head to toe. Once the moment of shock wore off, the three ventured further into the world. It was hours, or so they thought, and none of them were thirsty, hungry, or tired. This strength, that could only be by God's provision; supplying all the needs of His servants, giving them the urge to go on for hours without tiring. Suddenly Samson tilted his nose in the air and took a sniff. He blew the aroma from his nostrils as if the very smell disturbed him.

"Smoke," he said taking another whiff of air, "Very close too."

"Are you sure?" Gabriel asked, "I don't smell anything."

"A wolf's nose never lies."



The smoky smell led them to a small town. Its muddy streets and old buildings invited a sense of emptiness as the inhabitants hung about leisurely with little to do and little to look forward to. The smoke, accurately deduced by the wolf, hung heavy over the town like a veil springing from the crudely made chimneys. Crude would have been a perfect term to describe the villagers; there was no sense of joy anywhere. Creatures were spirit broken in some shape or form and the abjection on their faces was just as heavy as the constant smoke from the chimney stocks. At first none of the villagers paid any attention to the four strangers in town, but that did not last for long. Suddenly there was a murmuring among those who saw them. Eyes quickly focused on the colorful strangers. Gideon noticed that a gang of five began to walk towards them. He told his friends to move faster, but their escape was soon obstructed.

A skinny weasel, a jaguar, two bobcats and a large wart hog (whose height being on all fours was as tall as the seven foot Samson) were the band of creatures that stopped the three warriors in the middle of the street. The weasel took up the unpleasant, and destructive practice of puffing on a pipe, and the habit took its toll by rotting his teeth. The weasel smiled to reveal his abused choppers. Gabriel flinched from the sight of it. The weasel, noticing the rabbit's action, placed his pipe out of view under his cloak "Well, well," said the weasel coughing, "top of the night to you. Who might you all be?" "We are just passing through," Samson said, "please allow us to pass. We don't want nor do we bring any trouble."

The first bobcat, who stood by the weasel, flashed his knife for all to see.

"So you don't say!" replied the jaguar, "What's your rush? Stay in town for awhile- we'll give you a tour of the place. The graveyard will be the first, and the last stop." he said with a sneer.

"You and your nose, Samson," Gideon said, "that's the last time we trust it."

"I said I smelled smoke not trouble."

The weasel was the first to advance toward the three. He particularly had a itch for Gabriel's jacket.

"That's a nice jacket, black hare, I think its time for it to have a new owner." replied the weasel.

The weasel went to grab the hare, but Gabriel pushed him away. The weasel stumbled back into the arms of his comrades, and then regained his footing; his knife came apace

from his side. Gideon and Gabriel pulled their blades .

“Want to fight, eh?” said the weasel.

“I guess they do want trouble after all,” the jaguar said with a snicker.

The villagers, who could see or was in earshot, ran to the scene inciting the fight. Fighting was always a pastime in that town and seeing blood spilled was always a wretched way to pass the time in the nightly world. Growling, snarling, and bared teeth left little to the imagination of what was to come next. Among the crowd and standing in the back were two dogs. One was a lazy-looking Chow-chow. He was wearing a dingy cloak and he was equipped with a battle axe. To his left was a Papillon. This little fireball was wearing a helmet with two horns sticking out of the sides like a hat a Viking wears in stories. He wore a cloak that covered his upper half and around his waist was a series of four daggers. The little dog took a swaggering stance as his friend knelt down to him.

“So what do you think?”

“I think its time to take a nap,” said the little dog, yawning.

“No not that- the fight.”

“Oh! Well if I were a betting dog, I’d say the weasel and his gang pummels whoever is there. It should be a good fight. I do like a good fight,” the Papillon said rubbing his hands together.

“I’m going to get a better look,” said the chow chow.

Nothing much had been going on. The weasel and his friends were still eyeing over the bunch of creatures in their midst. One of the bobcats tried to stab Gideon , but the rabbit swung his sword, keeping the cat at bay. By this time the Chow-chow had made his way to the front of the crowd. When he saw Samson, he pushed his way back to his friend.

“Peppi, come quick, a fellow canine is in trouble.”

“A bulldog, a Retriever, a—”

“A wolf,” said the chow chow.

“Well,” said the Papillon rolling his eyes, “ I suppose we can help him, we being cousins and all.”

Before you can read the end of this sentence, the little dog and his comrade pushed their way between the gang, standing in front of the three with weapons in hand. Everyone was surprise to see them.

“Get out of the way, mutts!” shouted the weasel, “ This is our fight. If you don’t want your blood to stain the ground, I suggest you get lost and stay lost.”

The papillon stuck out his tongue to deride the weasel’s threat, which did nothing more but to incite one of the gang members to draw forward. The bobcat lunged at the papillon. It wasn’t much of a fight. Before the bobcat could do anything, the dog threw his dagger into the cat with such skill and a dash of style that the crowd was almost inclined to applaud.

“It would behoove you,” replied the papillon slowly, “ to back off.”

After seeing the quick disposal of the bobcat, the rest of the gang wasted no time in relinquishing their murderous pursuit under hollow threats, but the wart hog, before leaving chocked a smile and made haste to some unknown destination.

“Empty threats from empty heads,” said the papillon, holding his nose high in the air, “

The stand off was over. The crowd, disheartened that only one was killed, returned to the mundane drudgery of nightly life. Only the dogs and the three strangers were left in the muddy street. The papillon retrieved his dagger and took a look at the strangers in town.

Chapter 9: Colony of Dogs

“Everyone ok.” said the little dog extending his hand, “ My name is Peppi and this is my best friend, Ragel.”

“Pep- what?” replied Gabriel.

“Peppi! Just take pepper, take away the “er” and replace it with an “i”,” said Peppi.

“Thank you for stepping in.” Gideon said with obeisance.

“Our pleasure,” said Peppi, “I’m sure you could have handled it yourselves.”

“But you said the gang would pummel them,” replied Ragel under his breath.

“Its time for you to implement the virtue of silence,” said Peppi, “and quickly!”

“Hey are you trying to tell me to shut-up?”

“Is there a moon in the sky? Can birds fly?,” said Peppi, “You always speak at the wrong times.”

“And you can’t stop running your mouth,” said Ragel in retort.

The three laughed as they watched the little dog challenge the larger dog to an outright fight. Ragel, knowing how to alleviate his friend’s temper, allowed the little dog to push him down, giving him the impression that Peppi was stronger.

“That will teach you. Now,” Peppi said brushing his hands. He came over to Samson, looking over the wolf, “We must show all of you to Ananias at once.”

“Who’s that?” asked Gabriel.

“Our leader,” Ragel said rising to his feet, “He will find interest in all of you. Your clothes and your fur- it’s amazing.”

The Chow-chow had a eccentric look on his face when he spoke, and it made them very nervous.

“Stop scaring them!” Peppi said, seeing the fear on their faces. “There not a platter of meat and cheese! Forgive us, you must understand that we have never seen what you have. What do you call it?”

A perplexing look swept across their faces.

“ Gideon,” said Gabriel, “ what is he talking about?”

“I don’t know,” Gideon said shrugging his shoulders.

“He’s talking about our color. It’s called color,” replied Samson.

“I have heard of this from the stories Ananias has told us,” replied Peppi.

As they continued to talk, murmuring began to spread again; leaving no doubt of upcoming intentions.

“It seems we are drawing attention once again,” said Ragel, “For you own safety I would advise to come with us.”

With little choice, the three followed the two dogs out of town; and despite nearly getting into another squabble, they managed to get out without harm. An open prairie gave them a better view of the landscape. In the distance, almost impossible to see, was a range of mountains that stretched far along the horizon. They came upon a river. A boat sat along

the mossy shore that provided transportation for the two dogs.

“We’ll have to cross to the other side,” Peppi said, “ We can only take two at a time.”

Once across, they continued through a wood. The trees towered above them as the moonlight caused long shadows to grow. The journey was long, but the three never tired, which brought a sense of bewilderment to the two dogs; who always need to take a short break when traveling through this wood. With another lengthy march, the two dogs stopped short. Peppi went forward, running up a fallen tree; and checking around him, and produced a high pitched howl. Shortly after, another howl was heard in the distance. Peppi ran back.

“Now my friends. You must understand that the other dogs, in the valley up yonder, will be just as surprised as we were, but Ananias must inquire of you.”

Gabriel pulled Gideon aside to talk to him privately.

“I don’t trust those two,” Gabriel said, “Their taking us to another village-- its probably just a murderous as the last.”

“They saved our lives,” Gideon replied, looking over his shoulder, “If they wanted to kill us they could have let the crowd have us.”

“How do we know that they’re not leading us into a trap?”

“We don’t,” said Gideon, “We also have no idea what direction the children was taken in. They are our main concern, right? So maybe this Ananias can help us.”

“Are you two all right?” Peppi said, calling from afar.

“We’re fine,” Gideon said quickly.

Gideon patted Gabriel on the shoulder and both returned to the group.

“Let us move on. I’m starving and a good meal would appease my stomach,” replied Ragel, rubbing his belly.

“How can you think about your fat gut at this historic occasion?” stated Peppi. “ Your brain tends to be in you stomach at times.”

“And you are as fast with you mouth as you are with your daggers!”

“Please, you two,” said Samson, “Just take us to your village.”



Peppi straightened his hat, which got lop sided when he came down the tree, and led them through the rest of the forest. Soon the wood ended and down below a hill was a colony of dogs. All types of dogs were there: pure breeds and mixed breed together. The three continued down the knoll and received the same reaction as they did in the other town. Some dogs ran in the opposite direction wthey they saw them, others dropped whatever they were doing and just stared. Peppi led all of them to a large hut. Ragel went inside and another dog returned with him. The German Shepherd was struck with amazement at the sight of Samson and the two hares. He addressed wolf first.

“My name is Hans. Welcome to our home. Are the others with you?”

“Yes,” replied Samson, “These two,” he said referring to Ragel and Peppi, “led us here, they are quite the team.”

“We must see Ananias at once, Hans,” Peppi interjected.

“Yes, yes,” replied the German Shepherd with little concern to the command, “ there will be time for that, but first we must gather the others for the meeting. If you could, Ragel,

get the other leaders and we will meet back here, hurry now!"

With a salute, Ragel carried out the order. Peppi saw a group of dogs, who were inquisitive of the situation, moving towards them.

"Now, now there's nothing to see here," replied the dog, "Go back to your work, please."

The crowd, paying no mind to him, just passed him by. The crowd greeted the strangers with open arms. Gideon was happy that the treatment here was better in this place than the previous town. However, the greeting did not last long, for Ragel was coming back with twelve other dogs, who had some type of position within the colony. Hans was able to send the crowd away and those who were left had important business with the strangers. Ten of the twelve went inside the hut, and as they did each had the same eccentric look on their faces as Ragel did. Peppi, Ragel, Samson, Gideon, and Gabriel followed inside.

There was an old wooden throne, very plain and simple, near the back of the hut and the ten dogs stood at the side of it, five on each side, as if positioned like statues. The other two dogs, who were absent, returned with an much older dog. The older dog was being helped by the other two so he could walk. They led him to the throne and sat him down carefully. His great age made it hard to tell if he was alive at all.

"I don't think we'll get much out of him," Gabriel said, whispering to Gideon, "We probably won't get anything at all."

"I'M ALIVE AND WELL!" the old dog said, gazing at Gabriel.

The black hare nearly jumped out of his skin, and quickly made way to apologize with a slight bow. The old Wolfhound slowly sat up, with the help from Hans, and spoke to Ragel.

"Why have you summoned us today, Ragel?" the old wolfhound said.

"We have called this council to meeting, and we have called you, O gracious leader, who by the way have lead us in times of pain and woe; who--"

"Out with it, said the German Shepherd.

"These three," Ragel said.

The old wolfhound from his throne, inspected the three intently before speaking again.

"Where did you meet them?"

"Peppi and I saved them from being killed at a nearby town," answered Ragel.

"What town would that be," Ananias said with a raised eyebrow.

"It's the one beyond the forest and river. The one, uh, you told us not to hang about in."

One of the twelve dogs, a Doberman Pinscher name Dorvan, accosted the two dogs.

"Disobeying the words of our high leader! How foolish can you be? There will be punishment for this!"

Gabriel, offended that the two dogs were scolded, came to their defense. This action nearly brought about another squabble.

"Maybe I ought to take you outside and teach you some respect!" said Dorvan.

"Dorvan, stand down," replied the wolfhound, "Regal and Peppi, despite their disobedience; which will not be overlooked, has done a good thing. They were wise to bring them here. They remembered our ancestors' tales from long ago."

Ananias directed his attention to the three.

“When the Fallen was sent from the world you came from, many creatures went with him in that time of judgment. They were spirit broken by succumbing to the unicorn’s wife, but some remembered the world of day. The stories passed down helped us to remember that. This colony is where our ancestors settled. We are the descendants of the those dogs. It was here that we wear this color of ash. It is a mark- a mark of slavery. Every creature here is a slave to the Fallen. However, you four are creatures of color-- the mark of judgment has not clung to you. I believe that you have something to do here. Please tell us why you are here and I would like to here it from the wolf.”

Samson stepped forward. He told the story of Shavron’s disobedience and the judgment that was placed over them. The dogs began to speak amongst themselves. Even Ananias, whose face was firm, looked as if he has seen an apparition. He held up his hand and the dogs became quiet.

“Every child was taken?” Ananias said slowly,

“Everyone. Have you or anyone in the village seen such a great multitude?”

“It would be hard to miss,” said the wolfhound, “but no we have seen no such thing.”

The meeting drew to a close, but before the three left, Ananias posed a question to them.

“You said the Holy One has sent you to rescue these children, did he mention anything about freeing us, the descendants?”

Gabriel looked at Gideon, who glanced at Samson.

“He gave no mention of it,” said the wolf, somberly.

The wolfhound asked for assistance and left the hut with nothing else to say. Peppi and Ragel were not happy with the response either, for they, since they were pups believed the stories about the Holy One and that he would one day free them from the nightly prison. Leaving the hut, Peppi made haste to accommodate the three with sleeping quarters.

“Sleep?” said Gideon, “How do you know when?”

“We have a system. When the first horn sounds- there!” Ragel said turning his head to the sound, “We sleep. When the second horn sounds we all rise.”



Ragel made room in his hut for the three, and despite being little room to sit, all three found a space comfortable for them. Within minutes the chow chow was asleep, and to pass the time Samson spoke about how the Holy One restored Shavron from the hands of the Jezerah and Iya. Gabriel was quiet enough to listen, but deep down he resented the talk about God, and made his feelings known by sigh heavily whenever Samson mention the Lord. Gideon told his pupil to remain respectful during the tale, at which Gabriel got up and left the hut.

Gabriel’s walk was a combination of grumbling and agitation. He was angry at Samson for tell the story; he was angry with Gideon rebuking him; he was mad at everything. The mental pictures of leaving the Crosslands came about, making his resentment against anything godly to grow further.

“Stupid story,” said Gabriel, “ Sometimes I think they talk about God just to bug me.”

Just then he caught sight of another figure languidly walking beyond the colony’s boundary. No other dog was tarrying about; so, Gabriel, under his curiosity, decided to follow this unknown creature. The figure took time to stop after a few paces to look

behind him, but he found no one following; at least to his knowledge, for Gabriel; using his skill as a street-grub was able to stay out of sight without being detected. The old dog, under the use of a walking stick, made his way up a hill. Gabriel crouched behind a tree to see what would take place.

“O Lord,” said the old wolfhound, “I have spoken to your servants—the three from the world of day. I asked them about our freedom and the answer was less than promising. What am I to do; what am I to believe? Speak to me O God, be not deaf towards me tonight.”

Gabriel watched on, when suddenly a great gale seemed to engulf the area. This wind, this gale was something Gabriel never felt before. He could not speak; for he was afraid to; he could not run; for he did not have the desire, but he looked and heard a voice that spoke to the Ananias, the old wolfhound.

“I will show my mercy and grace to the world of night that all may remember that I am a God whose mercies are renewed daily and will turn the night into day for any creature that believes me. Ananias, do you believe me?”

Ananias looked up and said,

“Yes.”

“Then watch what I will do.”

The great gale came again and was gone. Gabriel stood flabbergasted. He ran back to the hut, but did not tell Gideon or Samson what he saw or heard. With the coming sound of the horn, most of the dogs were rising to start the night again. Ragel, however, was slack in rising and the three were deciding whether or not to wake him.

“I could just poke him with my sword,” said Gabriel.

“Maybe we should just leave him alone,” said Gideon, “He’s drooling.”

At that moment, Peppi came stumbling in still under the influence of sleep, wiping his eyes. He went over, grabbed Ragel by the tail, and started pulling him. The chow chow was dragged a few feet before he woke up. Showing his contempt for this, he snapped at his friend, who merely jumped slightly out of the way to avoid the bite.

Ananias was waiting with nearly the entire colony around him. The wolfhound was smiling as he saw the three strangers. God’s encouragement of his promise gave Ananias strength. Now he was sure that the Lord not only would help the strangers, but all the inhabitants in the world of night.

“I see you all slept well,” said the wolfhound, “I wish I could point you in the right direction, but I know now that God is with you.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Samson, “Are there any dangers that you can tell us about?”

“A few” replied Ananias to the dismay of the others, “The Fallen has many minions, the bats for example. They serve as the Fallen’s legion, and they travel the skies without fear of who they might meet. The darkness entangles the bats more than any other creature save the unicorn himself. If you’re going to travel further in , as I can see in your eyes, be careful not to meet them.”

“From what you told us we might not have a choice,” said Gabriel.

“True,” Ananias said with a smile, “So let me tell you what to expect. Most of the bats are large. The smallest I’ve seen is large as a dog. But-”

“I hate that conjunction,” said Gabriel.

“But,” said Ananias emphasizing the word, “there is one who is very large, Vamp the leader of the group. I saw a group of them flying over the colony. That is all I know of them.”

“Hopefully that's all we'll have to know too,” said Gideon.

“If it please you, Ananias,” said Samson, “We could use some help on this journey?”

The old wolfhound turned around to his colony, looked at all the faces that were focused intently on him.

“I need two dogs of brave heart and mind to travel with these three creatures to protect them from the deep evil of this world. It may cost you your life. I ask this, my fellow canines, because you all know that what I have told you is true of God, and I believe that the same God is working in them and both they and this world of night will be blessed.” It was quiet after the petition, no one stirred. Many of dogs did not like the idea of death to protect the strangers. It seemed that no one would step forward, and then Ragel made his way through the crowd and stood before Ananias.

“Courage Ragel,” said Ananias proudly, “You will always be remembered as Ragel the Valiant, for you were the first to take on the journey ahead of you. Is there one more?”

All was quiet once again. This time no one stepped forward.

“No one-- that's a shame,” Ananias turned his attention back to the three. “Ragel will travel with you. May God bless you four in all your--”

“Wait!” said a voice among the crowd, “I want to be blessed too!”

Peppi came forward apace.

“You're right, God is doing something, and I want to be part of it. I'm sure it benefits all of us. Forgive me my leader for not stepping forward earlier.”

The old dog had a curious smile most did not see, for he knew that if Regal came forward, Peppi would surely follow.

“Peppi,” said Ananias looking down on him, “it doesn't matter how long one takes to step forward, it only matters that one does. Now what should you be remembered as?” said the wolfhound scratching his noggin.

“How about Peppi the Great?” said the little dog, as the laughter soon followed. “Or Peppi the Brilliant,” he replied, as even a greater ruckus followed.

“What's so funny?” he replied, accosting the crowd. “Now this is a good one,” Peppi took the moment to display a poignant pose, “Peppi the Mighty!”

If it could be said that one could die from laughter, Peppi was, quiet possibly, the instrument of fatality. It took the stern look of Ananias to bring all giggling to a halt.

“I've got it,” said the wolfhound, “You will be remembered as Peppi the Zealous.

Although you are small you have a fire in you we have grown to love.”

“Fire---I like that!” said Peppi, standing to his full height. “That's why I like you Ananias—always courteous.”

“Dear, Samson,” said Ananias, turning back to the three, “You have no weapon. What can you do to defend yourself?”

“Well,” said Samson, swelling up on pride, “I've learned how to use a bow and arrow.”

“An archer,” said Ananias joyfully, “We share a common trait. In my younger years I could hit any target at one hundred paces. I'm sure there is a generous dog here that can lend you a decent bow and arrows.”

A Labrador came forward and presented his bow and arrows to Samson. "This bow has faired me well," said the dog, "It should be of great assistance to you." The colony gave their farewells to the five travelers. It was early for the night, although that did not matter. The little dog led the way southward in search of the young captives. Rescuing the generation of Shavronites was taking a turn for the better and with God's help it would be a complete success.

Chapter 10: A Sea of Souls

The wart hog, who you meet a few chapters back, was racing aggressively along the open plains of the world of night. His hoofs hit the ground in a rhythmic gallop as his breath came quickly from his lungs in a deep and bellowing sound. Gradually the open plain emerged into a sea of sand that carried a gorgeous gleam due to the moon's aid. He stopped for a moment, as if he has lost his way, but upon remembering his road, he quickly returned to his gallop until he made his way to his destination.

The wart hog's colleague was waiting for him impatiently. It walked back and forth through the sand, complaining of the creature's tardiness. Finally, in the distance, the cougar; the kidnapper, descried his friend running up towards him. The cougar stood with his fist clinched as if he was going to strike the warthog.

"Where have you been, Gluttmore?" the cougar said forcibly, "I've been waiting for hours. You were suppose to meet me once I came back!"

"Sorry, Slavebourne," replied the wart hog, trying to catch his breath, "but my absence has brought something just as vital as the children you have there."

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

His friend drew closer to the cougar, who was a little put off by the move; but once the hog whispered something in the cat's ear his eyes enlarged as if he heard something tantalizing.

"Really?" the cougar replied, slyly.

Gluttmore nodded. The cougar intimated for his friend to follow him. A few paces away Slavebourne showed Gluttmore the multitude of children, sleeping comfortably together; stretching far into the distance.

"Look at them," said the cougar, "Sleep, unaware of where they are or what our master has in store for them."

"How long does the spell work?"

"A few hours, and then—"

Suddenly a few children began to shake off the spell that had overcome them. The cougar, in haste, took his horn and began to play that wicked tune, putting the children back to slumber.

"That was close," said Gluttmore, "When will Dranus arrive?"

"In time," said the cougar, "He'll be here soon enough."

Over the sandy sea appeared a myriad of shadows. Shadows darted to and fro like little bugs back and forth in an endless wave of flight. Slavebourne looked up and above him were a multitude of vampire bats. They were so numerous that the two below could not count them all. The bats were as black as the sky they dominated, and if it wasn't for the

moon's light they won't have been seen at all.

Down they came, one by one; huddling together in malice and strife. But one, the leader of the entire legion, pressed through his subordinates, keeping his sights on Gluttmore and Slavebourne. He was large, as large as a horse; his back was angled, placing his head as a perfect weapon of destruction. Around his neck was a form fitting brace that acted as a collar to distinguish his commanding stature over his troop, and for a brief moment, Slavebourne and Gluttmore felt a spark of fear run through their veins.

"Well, well it took you two long enough. Dranus has been waiting."

"He has to wait no longer," the cougar said annoyed, "Where is he anyway?"

"Roaming to destroy, as he always does," the bat said with a snarl, "But let me take a closer look at these children."

The monstrous bat looked over the sea of slumbering bodies with disgust.

"Where is he going to put all of them?" asked Vamp.

"That's for him to decide" replied Gluttmore.

From a distance, hoofs were heard beating the ground violently. The sound was distinctive and always carried a deep piercing chill in the air whenever it was heard. Slavebourne, Gluttmore, and Vamp, shuddered from the breeze: the three knew instinctively that Dranus was on his way. The sound of the hoofs became louder and louder; becoming a deafening sound.

The arrival of the unicorn brought his three subjects to bow forcibly under his glare. He was gigantic and his presence was terrifying. The unicorn was built like a warhorse, his eyes were black, and his pupils were slit as a snake's would be. The wings upon its back were large and bat like; which he could easily transform into eagle wings if he needed to deceive. His mane, wild and silver, flowed over his white skin. The silver horn on his head was long, thin, and shined brightly in the moonlight, but its glimmer had deeper properties unknown to many. The beast called the cougar forward in a commanding tone; and not daring to seem defiant, Slavebourne crawled over to his master.

"Where is my gift?"

"The children," Slavebourne cautiously, "are over that ridge."

The beast made his way to his temporary prize.

"Look at all the souls!" he said as his eyes grew with greed, "So many to keep—so many to enslave."

The beast stood silently overlooking the children, his three minions dared not speak, least a pernicious punishment would follow suit. Finally, Dranus turned from the children to address his subjects.

"Vamp gather your legion and take these children to my lair—down to the deepest depths."

"Master," said Gluttmore jumping in suddenly, "I saw something that you might want to know about."

Dranus's look showed more contempt than that of appreciation; and if Gluttmore wasn't quick about his speaking, Dranus would make sure he would never speak again.

"There are three creatures who are well- they were- were different."

"Explain," said the unicorn with a hint of uneasiness in his voice.

"They didn't look like us. Their clothes and fur—"

The unicorn, listening to the description, quickly came up with the answer; that not only was true, but put a swelling fear in his being. Dranus knew that the Holy One had sent those creatures to this world. For what reason?-- he did not know and did not care. The unicorn's reign over the world of night was being threaten in some form and when Dranus was threaten his only reprisal was to destroy the threat. Six bats were called forward, they were charged with the task of killing the five creatures. To prove the success of the attack, dead bodies were demanded to be brought back. The six bats, under command, swooped into the night sky in search of blood.

"Now, Vamp, back to your work."

Vamp and his troop each took a child up into the night sky. The flying was fast, passing across lakes, mountains, and valleys, until they came to an immense chasm. Vamp dove into the crack, as his troops followed suit. Down into the dark the flew, until light could not enter further. Three trips were made, until ever child was ensnared in Dranus's lair.

Chapter 11: Battle on the Open Plain

The air was steady as the five traveled briskly over hilltops and open plains. After a few hours of walking, Peppi and Ragel sat down to rest. Gideon and the others joined them, although they were not tired themselves.

"This is insane," replied Gabriel, "We have no idea where we are going?"

"That usually the best way to get there," said Peppi, "When you don't know anything you eventually end up knowing something."

"What are you talking about?" said the black hare, "Gideon do you know what he is saying?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." said Gideon.

Peppi shook his head, bewildered that the two did not understand.

"I think he means," said Samson, "Despite our lack of information, we will eventually find our way to the children."

"See! see! The wolf understands." said Peppi excitedly.

Gabriel returned to his murmuring over the current circumstances.

"There are no stars to guide us. For all we know we could be walking in circles."

"You may have a point, Gabriel" Gideon said, "We have no map and Peppi and Ragel have never traveled beyond the colony, except when they met us."

There was much doubt within the group, but Samson made all fears disappear with a sound word,

"The Lord will guide us, be patient."

"Enough of that God stuff!" shouted Gabriel, rejecting the wisdom, "Admit it, we're lost."

"You have a real problem with godly talk," said Samson. "I pray that the Lord deals with you to change that."

Something in Samson's words set Gabriel's heart to anger. He rose up and stormed over to the wolf, which was a bold thing indeed.

"You've got a big mouth Samson. I'm going to teach you have to keep it shut."

The wolf, surprised by the hare raising his hands into clinched fists, began to chuckle.

This, of course, made Gabriel irate; and forgetting his manners, he threw a left hook,

punching Samson in the stomach. Samson, unshaken by the blow, looked over to Gideon and said,

“Gideon, you and Gabriel better take a nice walk or I’m going to show him a real left hook.”

Gideon, taking Gabriel by the scruff of his jacket, lead him away from the group. In the distance they both were in a verbal fight. In the end, it seemed that Gideon had won, for Gabriel stomped away near a large hill. Gideon came back to apologize to his friend "Sorry, Samson, Gabriel has always been cold when it comes to God. He did hurt did he?" "No. He just needs a lot of love, we both know that.”

Over a neighboring hill, Gabriel was still irate about Samson’s words. He was lying on his back admiring the glowing moon. Every moment he spent in the world of night gave him a sense of enmity for the place. It was stupid, he thought, to travel into unknown territory. Trusting a God he could not see, was as distant as the moon in the sky. Yet over his reflection a spark of fear came over him and all his objections disappeared. Up in the sky he could see something moving. Whatever it was it was coming closer and closer to him. He got up, pulled his blade, and began to inch back toward the hill. He did not have to wait long to see the terror in the sky. Six dog sized bats landed twenty feet in front of him. Each revealed its fangs followed by a hiss, which put such fright into the hare that he nearly lost his grip on the sword. The presence of the bats removed all clear thinking for the rabbit; for he should have cried out for help at that moment. His mouth was dry; he could not find the words to speak. He tried once more and the words came slowly. "W- what do you want?"



Such a question needed no verbal answer. A little grin was all that was needed to make Gabriel make a run up the hill and down the other side. The bats followed closely behind in hot pursuit, being enticed by the unicorn’s command. Samson and the others were startled to see Gabriel yelling and running from the very enemies that desired never to meet. One bat leaped into the air and slammed Gabriel to the ground. The bat’s aim was to tear into the hare’s neck, but Gabriel kept his blade between him and the bat’s fangs. Ragel, Peppi, and Gideon ran forward to help. Samson, with bow and arrow, kept the other bats at bay.

With a great cry, Gideon brought his blade down to slay Gabriel’s attacker. The blow missed, but the anticipation of being struck, was enough to send the bat into retreat for the moment. Ragel had already cut down one to the bats. Peppi on the other hand wasn't fairing well. Throwing his daggers proved to be pointless, for the bat was too nimble for them. After throwing the last knife, which the little dog had deeply regretted, he remain helpless. The bat prepared to attack. He arched is back, spread its jaws, and jumped at the little dog, leaving Peppi to face an inevitable fate. Even when it seems that all was over, there came a hope by way of Samson. An arrow had caught that bat in the neck killing him instantly, leaving the little dog covered by the dead brute.

Samson was shooting arrow after arrow with unfruitful results. He almost hit one bat, one arrow nearly struck Gideon, and another missed its target completely. The only arrow that made its mark was Peppi’s.

"Maybe you should aim first," said Gideon.

"I am," replied Samson, looking around nervously.

Gabriel and Gideon killed another bat. Ragel finished off another. The last two bats began to retreat. They whispered to each other of what to do next.

"They are more skillful than we thought," replied the first bat.

"Yes, what do we do now?" stated the second.

"Return to Dranus."

"But he'll--"

We can go no where else," replied the second, " We have no other choice."

The two bats leaped into the air and flew away, dodging a few arrows from the wolf's bow. Ragel, under great distress, was earnestly looking for his friend.

"Where's Peppi?" he cried, " PEPPI!"

A low murmur came from under the dead bat. Everyone languidly and cautiously walked over.

"Be careful this one may be still alive," said Gabriel.

Weapons were drawn as they got closer. To their surprise they saw a small arm wiggling from under the bat. The muffled sound of "Get him off of me" came from the little dog's mouth. The bat was pushed aside and the papillon jumped up petrified. He took a moment to gather himself and went to find his daggers. The others followed, making sure that he was all right.

"Are you hurt?" asked Samson.

"No," said Peppi brushing himself off, " the foul beast was already dead when he landed on me. And look, my helmet is broken!"

Samson walked over to the corpse. He saw the arrow.

"At least one of them made its mark."

"I'm glad it did," stated Peppi.

After making sure that all was well for the time being, it became clear that another onslaught of bats could come at any moment.

"We have to move and quickly," Gideon said, "We don't need another fight like that."

Can the three of you," Gabriel said referring to Samson and the two dogs, " get the scent of those bats? They may lead us to where we need to go."

The brightness of the idea put a hope back into a dreary situation.

"Great idea, Gabriel." said Gideon, "Sometimes you wit astounds me."

"It should do it all the time," replied Gabriel, playfully.

"We should have brought a Bloodhound with us," Ragel said. He took a moment to sniff the air, "I've got a scent, but its weak. What about you, Samson?"

After a few sniffs, the wolf cocked a grin.

"To the south for sure."

"Does any trouble with that scent?" said Gideon.

"Come and see," said Samson, "Come and see."

The party of five made their way over the hilltops with the wolf in the lead.

Chapter 12: Led Astray

The long journey back to Dranus's lair was a questionable one for the two bats. Failing to carry out the command of the unicorn would only result in a death sentence. The thoughts of what their master would do to them tormented their minds as they circled the great gap below. Diving down into the deep revealed the chasm's intrinsic nature, with its sharp rocks and jagged corners, the bats had to carefully fly in order not to injure themselves. Down below awaited the unicorn along with Slavebourne, Gluttmore and Vamp. The heavy glare from Dranus told of his swift, hateful wrath to come; and considering the apathetic look from Vamp, the situation did not appease any anxieties the bats had. The two bats had practiced their story before they came.

The lie was this: the three strangers were dead, but since the battle was fierce, resulting in the death of their peers, it was impossible to bring the bodies back to the lair. Hoping that the story would work, the bats believed that Dranus would send some other bats to retrieve the bodies, and then the escape would be not only viable, but permanent as well. Lying was an odious trait that Dranus had taught them, but little did they know that a servant is never above the master; for the master knew the trick beforehand. There were many things Dranus had power over and many things he had not. The world of night was his stomping grounds, and the unicorn knew of his minions' deeds: whether or not they were a success or failure.

Vamp trotted over to one the bats and whispered in his ear:

"Bad move coming back."

The large bat then returned back to his master's side, leaving his former acquaintances to their fate.

The bats articulated their story quickly and as deceitfully as they had planned, but the events were all ready known.

"I made the lie and mastered it," said Dranus. "It was a lie that brought the entire creation into corruption and you think your little one will fool me?"

The two bats were silent.

The horn on the unicorn's head began to glow and the wings on his back arched menacingly. Before them Dranus the unicorn was changing into Dranus the dragon. His ivory skin became scaly, armored and pitch black making him look like a complete shadow. Hoofs cracked into dragger-like claws, and what ever beauty there was before was now lost. Without another word, the dragon blew a great blaze of gray fire that burned the bats to ashes. A wicked smile slowly emerged across the Dranus's face.

Vamp, Slavebourne, and Gluttmore cringed from the act. After his tirade, the dragon shot a icy glare at them, letting them know he was quite indiscriminate of what he killed. Gradually, the dragon became the unicorn again, and for the time being all was placid in the great deep.

Further away from that dreadful scene, Samson were sniffing the air with all diligence. The scent had taken them nearer to the mountain range. The wolf scrambled back and

forth, and then suddenly he stopped.

"Let me guess--you lost the scent," said Gabriel.

"All this way and nothing to show for it." replied Peppi.

"This was a bad idea," said Ragel, " We have to retrace our steps and get back on track.

"We don't have to do that. All we'll be doing is wasting time," replied Gideon, "Samson got us this far. Look, all we have to do is turn this way and walk straight," he said pointing forward, " Who's with me?"

On and on the disagreements went, each figuring that their idea was best. Tempers flared more than they wanted, which made finding the correct direction arduous and tiring.

Gabriel plopped down on the ground and started to complain.

"Pointless!" Gabriel said, " This was pointless the moment we entered this place. We're sent out in the middle of nowhere to find these children, and were being guided by two dogs who haven't even ventured outside their own colony.

"Yes we have," the little dog shouted.

"Only that one time," replied Gabriel, "It's better just to quit and return to the colony."

"This is no time to give up," replied Gideon, "We have mission to do. The Holy One-

"Here we go again," Gabriel said rolling his eyes.

Gabriel's words took Gideon by surprise; not only because of the timing, but also by how disrespectful they were. The white hare glowered at his young student. The glance seemed to keep Gabriel's tongue at bay; yet the black hare wanted to say more.

"If you have something to say, Gabriel, say it." demanded Gideon.

Gabriel returned to his feet.

"You always try to drown out the reality of things with one of your tidbits about the Holy One. I'm getting sick and tired of it."

Gideon, although inclined to swat Gabriel across the mouth, was lead by God to deal with Gabriel with words of truth rather than fists of wrath.

"First of all, I expect a little more respect," said Gideon, "And Secondly, no one is trying to hide the reality of things. God will help us. Everything isn't easy, some things are hard, but there's nothing God can't do. Right now we are in a hard spot. And," Gideon said in retrospect, " God has helped me before. We should have been asking for God's help instead of bickering among one another."

This, for the first time, was the best plan of action; for prayer is always the most important deed anyone can do, and a deed no one should do without. Gideon, Samson; and despite not knowing what to do, Peppi and Regal joined in to seeking the Lord's help. Gabriel stood afar as not to hear the words, and did not return to the group until he was sure that they were done.

"What do we do now?" asked Ragel, "Did God hear us?"

"He hears us," Samson said boldly, " and until he answers we will do what we are suppose to do."



Dranus stood idle as his three minions watched on, wondering if it was prudent to address him. Before any of them gained the courage to attempt the feat, the unicorn took note of Vamp.

"Still alive," Dranus said looking at Vamp, "is your army so impotent as not to follow out

a simple death sentence?"

The bat lowered his head. For a brief moment Vamp thought that his life would be snuffed out by his master; but the deathblow that was immediate for his subordinates, was put aside for a more important plan of action.

"Do you know Astra?" Dranus asked.

"Yes I do," Vamp replied raising his head slightly, "She is the falcon who lives in the great willow tree near the city of Ishmahal. She is a bird that is a traitor to her own kind." "She has been a great aid to me" replied Dranus. "I'm going to require her assistance again. Vamp come with me. Slavebourne and Gluttmore stay here."

The great willow tree hid among the roots of a deep forest comprised of banyan trees. The tree itself was planted firmly on a small island surrounded by a shallow moat. The giant roots spread like tentacles into the water, and the branches hung low to the ground to hide any occupants therein. Inside the willow tree was the falcon. She slept quietly among the branches, undisturbed by the elements. A cold shiver, however, came over her that did little to stir her, but another blow of cold air sent such a chilling pain through her body that she came from her sleep, noticing that the tree was covered in frost. From without waited Dranus: a beast she feared more than any other.

"Come out of the tree, I want to have a word with you," said Dranus.

The falcon flew down, causing the frost to fall. Astra was as large as a horse, but in the sight of Dranus nothing but an ant, and when she made her way slowly over from her island, the bird took the position of bondage by crouching low to the ground.

"Bird, how goes the night?" said Dranus.

"No better than before," she said solemnly.

Not particular caring whether she was well or not, Dranus went to his purpose for coming.

"I have need of you and do not fail me," said Dranus, " for I have destroyed two others (he made a quick glance at Vamp) "and will not hesitate to do the same to you. There are five travelers. Three of them have not been tainted as you are. I know my Enemy (referring to God) has sent them to assail me. They are here to rescue the children that I have in my lair. Find them and lead them to Ishmalhal. After that you are done and can return to the tree."

"Why not send big ugly over there to do the job," she said referring to Vamp.

The bat came forward with a hiss. These two creatures, and their species in general, had always had a deep strife over the skies. Warring factors contributed to an stronghold for the bats on the upper realm. Vamp reminded the falcon of her downcast position.

"Your empty insult will not return you or your kind to the skies. We reign and you birds hide yourselves in mountains and caves."

Astra ignored the comment and inquired further of the strangers.

"How are they different?" she asked.

"Color!" Vamp replied still annoyed by her comment, "Two rabbits: one black, one white. A wolf and two dogs from this world are with them also."

The very command given to the falcon was very much a concern for her. Ishmalhal was a wicked city. The natives, being distracted by much reviling, had a lustful pleasure in food

and strong drink. Any creature entering therein was known to have such vices overcome them. However, Astra was not inclined to second guess Dranus, and taking his threat seriously, she said not another word. The unicorn's eyes saw, by the bird's expression, a glimpse of concern for the strangers she would have to destroy. He, using his deceitful devices, immediately did away with an possibility of concern that could manifest itself; for concern would lead to love, which always leads to God, which brings salvation—and Dranus did not want that.

"Care not for the strangers." said Dranus deceitfully, "Our world must remain the way it is. Its is what you know. You became a traitor to help me keep this world exactly the way it is, right?"

"Yes," Astra said tensely.

"And as a traitor, you must have a safe haven," replied Dranus, seeing his wicked words at work, "Haven't I kept you safe from Vamp and the other bats even when you venture out to eat?"

"Yes," she said lowering her head.

"So with those facts in place you will bring the five to Ishmalhal," replied Dranus, "You all ready know the reward for shortcomings. Do not look so sad little bird. If you do this for me I will allow all the birds to fly amongst the sky again. I will tell the bats to leave the birds in peace."

Vamp could not believe his ears, but upon further cogitation, he knew that this was one of the unicorn's classic wiles: make a promise, lie about it, and never bring about its true fulfillment. The bat had seen his master use it time and time again against any creature he found perfect to manipulate for his own glory. And it was a trick that Dranus had used on him, although Vamp believed that he was beyond that kind of deception— a dangerous belief.

Astra raised her head as if a glimmer of hope had arrived; and for a brief moment, which Dranus only needed, she believed him.

"You promise?" she said rising to her full height for the first time, " Say that you promise."

The unicorn looked her directly in the eyes and said this,

"I am your master, why should I have to promise? Now go and do as I've said."

The unicorn, with Vamp trailing at a distance, left the bird alone.

"Are you sure that the bird will do her job?" asked Vamp, inquiring further of his master's plans.

"It matters not," exclaimed Dranus, " for if she obeys something is destroyed; and if she does not obey, she will be destroyed. Either way my will shall be done."

There was a odd silence between the bat and unicorn. Vamp was not sure if his master would speak again or if it was wise to speak to him, but Dranus broke the silence with another vicious command.

"Go and gather your legion and head to the city. Wait in the shadows until I give you word. When the five arrive at the city they won't get out, however, if they manage to escape kill them immediately. Are you able to do this or not?"

"Yes. They won't escape my mighty legion," Vamp said confidently, "When you chose us

to be your eyes of the night, you chose victory."

"Many words, little to show." replied Dranus.

Vamp, put down for his high speech, left his master alone to gather his subordinates.



Under the bright, white moon the five continued their search. The mountain range had made its introduction as a difficult hike. A labyrinth of sharp rocks and boulders was laid out before them causing the journey to be perilous: on more than one occasion someone would trip or nearly twist their ankle, but there were no serious injuries. Two hours went by before they reached a river. The sight of the river was like that of a oasis for Peppi and Regal. The water ran quietly down the slope, as fish swam vigorously upstream.

"Trout and plenty too!" said Regal, liking his chops, " My belly has been neglected long enough."

Ragel stood by the edge of the river with his axe raised and waited for an opportunity to hit any unsuspecting fish. When he did, he only got a face full of water. He did this repeatedly with the same results, and with comical frustration.

"Aim," replied Peppi, looking on, "Aim!"

"How long do you two need to rest?" asked Gideon.

"A few minutes," said Peppi, " Once we eat and take a quick nap, we'll be good to go."

After much travail, Ragel did acquire plenty of fish, dividing his spoil evenly with Peppi. The two dogs slept by the river thereafter to enjoy a few moments of peace. Gideon went over to talk to his pupil, who was sitting at the edge of the river with his feet swaying back and forth in the water. Gideon joined him.

"Are you all right?" asked Gideon, "You look bothered about something."

"It took you five days ,but finally figured it out."

"You really need to change your attitude. There are parents back in our world who are depending on us to find their children."

"From what you've told me: if they weren't acting like a bunch heathens, they wouldn't be in the situation they are in."

"True," said Gideon, "but the Holy One has shown Shavron mercy—He's giving us another chance."

When Gideon mention God, as he is known to do, it triggered a volatile reaction within Gabriel. He stood from the river; and in bitter anger, he spoke foolishly.

"I'm tired of God this and God that," Gabriel shouted, " We don't even know if the children are even alive. They're probably dead and I would be glad of it, so I can go back home."

Above all things, Gideon had been patient with his pupil's mouth, but this time the hare deemed the cruelty from Gabriel beyond his patience. Rising quickly, he slapped Gabriel on the mouth; and for a moment both looked at each other: the teacher giving his disciple angry look and the student despising it.

"Don't you ever say that again, hear me---NEVER!" shouted Gideon.

Just after Gideon had spoken, he caught a glimpse of something in the sky. Gabriel turned around to see what was up. Astra had found the five with more ease than she expected.

The bird did another turn before descending.

"It's big," said Samson, " but its no bat. What do we do?"

"No time to think," said Gideon, "Here it comes!"

The falcon landed on the other side of the river. She was perched on a boulder near the shore. Astra was taken aback by the color she saw; it mesmerized her so much that she almost forgot what her job was. She shook her head to clear away the stupor. The two rabbits placed their hands on the swords. Samson, Peppi and Ragel came to the rabbits' side. There was an eerie silence until Gideon spoke.

"Who are you and what do you want? And speak quickly before my friend's arrow finds its mark.

"Hopefully," Samson said placing the arrow on the string.

The large bird spread its wings, flapped them in the air, and spoke in a calm voice.

"My name is Astra. I saw you from above. You looked like you were lost, so I came to see if I could help."

"We're fine, thank you," replied Gideon.

"Actually," said Peppi, jumping in, "we're sort of lost."

"Either you're lost or not. Which is it?"

"Lost," said Ragel.

"Good," said the bird proudly, "I can be of assistance. Now, where are you going?"

Peppi was inclined to give the information, knowing the assistance was warranted, but Gideon saw a danger in releasing every secret to the bird.

"Hold on Peppi," Gideon said cutting him short, "We shouldn't be too hasty in giving information to a creature we just meet. I'm sure, Astra, that you can understand that?"

"Indeed I can," she said, "However, there is a city that I could take you to. Ishmalhal is a great city where you can rest properly and have food that will satisfy every palette of your tongue."

"Food," Ragel said pushing Peppi to the side.

"You ate five trout," Peppi said, "What are you gluttonous?"

"My belly carries a heavy burden, you know that Peppi," said Ragel.

"Hold on, Ragel, I don't trust this bird," said Gideon.

"Am I not under the same night as you?" replied Astra, "My kind has felt the pain of the Dranus as the two dogs could sympathize with. Once the birds flew among the clouds, but now because of this cursed night, the bats rule the skies and have driven the birds to dwell in mountains and caves. I just saw you and wanted to help, but if you're so inconsiderate of receiving help, then I shall be on my way."

The falcon turned to fly away, but it was all a little act, for she was hoping it would change the tone of the conversation, and it did so.

"Wait, I'm sorry, we do need help," said Gideon, "How do we get to Ishmalhal?"

Astra explained that she could carry two of them on her back and one of them in each of her talons. The city was only a few minutes away. Gabriel volunteered to stay behind on the first run.

"Are you sure?" asked Gideon, "Look I—I didn't do it to hurt you."

"Sure," said Gabriel, remembering scolding blow, "You meant it though."

"And you meant what you said," said Gideon.

Gabriel turned his back. Samson and Gideon sat on the back of Astra. The bird flew high enough to grab Ragel and Peppi over the shoulder with her talons as they ascended into

the air.

Chapter 13: The City of Ishmalhal

Astra's flight was quick. The wind blew hard against Peppi's face. He looked over to see how Ragel was fairing and saw that the chow chow was enjoying the ride by allowing his tongue to flap in the air. Above, Peppi could hear the joyful cries of Samson and Gideon. The flight to the city was longer than expected, but none were concerned over the matter; for flying on a bird was a rare experience and they wanted to savor every moment. Astra herself never gave rides and hearing that she was bringing pleasure to all of them, nearly helped her to forget the deceitfulness of her deed. Finally, Astra stopped at a grand lake. In the middle of it was a huge metropolis that sat upon seven tall arches. Merry music was faint in the background, but still could be heard. From the building came lights that reflected on the water, giving the pattern of polka-dots.

"This is as close as I go," replied Astra, " Well, that's Ishmalhal up ahead. There is a party throughout the night- every night. It seems that it never ends."

The idea of a never ending party was not an inviting factor for Samson or Gideon, but Ragel tried to reassure the two that a little fun was what was needed after such a arduous journey.

"How are we to get over there?" asked Peppi.

"I have seen others take a ferry across to the city," said Astra, " There is usually a horn call before it comes to shore. I'm off to get your friend. Have a good time."

The bird left and flew out of sight. After some searching, Peppi found a horn tied to a post with a sign on it. This is how it ran:

Call the hippo to enter the city of festivity.

For those who are bores what a great pity.

A party that never ends keeps us from any serious matter.

Music, dancing, and where the food makes you fatter.

So, blow the horn my dear friend.

Enjoy the great party that has no end.

"Will it work?" said Gideon.

"Only one way to find out?" said Peppi.

The others were eager to get started, but Samson was not so easily persuaded.

"Something's strange about that sign," said Samson " This seems like a trap."

"Trap, snap!" said Peppi preparing to blow the horn, " It's just a party, stop worrying."

Peppi blew the horn. A mighty sound resonated from it; sending small ripples along the water. In the distance, a ferry was coming forward. As it got closer, they saw that something was pulling it. At first, they thought that it was a rock, but once the head popped up they saw that it was a hippopotamus. The hippo took some time to look over the creatures of color. He opened his mouth, revealing the girth of it. The hippo spoke in a slow and deep voice as the others looked on.

"Who has blown the horn?"

"It was I," Peppi said, pointing to himself.

"I see others will they be joining you?"

"Yes, we will," said Ragel " I can't wait till we get there. It sounds like they're having a ball over there."

"It's a ball like no other," said the hippo, "Come my friends, upon the ferry."

The hippo presently turned around and everyone boarded the vessel. The seven arches were much larger up close and the city was high in the air. The hippopotamus glided between one of the great archways and finally stopped under the city. The laughter, music, and dancing that had been nearly silent from ashore was now a thunderous sound. They all covered their ears

"Don't fret friends," replied the hippo, "You will get use to the sound in due time."

"How will we get all the way up there?" asked Peppi.

The hippopotamus bellowed. He did this two times. Strangely under the barrage of noise, his call was heard, and a circular platform was lowered to the water by a massive chain. Everyone got on.

"Enjoy my friends. Enjoy the party that never ends. It's a party you will never want to leave."



However, his voice was only muffled by the loud sounds of cheering. Two polar bears, turning a stone capstan, hoisted up the platform. As the platform came up, the five were introduced to the pure debauchery. Ishmalhal was a city of buildings upon buildings. The maze-like streets created a mysterious urge to travel deeper into the alleyways. Confetti fell like rain. Dancers and musicians paraded the streets drumming their drums and trumpeting their trumpets. All kinds of creatures crowded the streets clapping and stomping their feet. The music's hypnotic tune put the six into a dreamlike state. Before the five travelers had a chance to take it all in, they were suited with party hats. Some bystander plopped a big floppy sombrero on Gideon's head that was frankly too big for him, but once he managed the hat with his ears, the hat stayed squarely on top. They watched as some creatures enjoyed fresh fruits, others drank what looked like water, but it could have been something else, and the song they sung was of a wicked rhyme and rhythm. Most of it made no sense, but under the guidance of wine it didn't matter to them. The streets were lit with hundreds of candles, some hung as chandlers tied to tall poles. However, a deep examination would have revealed the true nature of this revelry: all the inhabitants had some form of drunkenness, the streets were lined with food, most rotten from the weeks before sending a redolence to make any landfill a sweet aroma.

The two dogs, Peppi and Ragel, were already taken hostage by the music. Both ran off to the nearest eating spot, gobbling down the sweets there. A creature came up to Samson with a bottle of wine. Samson walked away.

Further away, Astra returned to Gabriel.

"What took you so long?"

"I was going as fast as I could," Astra said, "It takes some time to get to the city. Now climb aboard."

Once Gabriel was upon the back of the falcon, they were off to the city. On the way,

Gabriel wanted to ask her a few questions.

"I've had a long time to think over some things. I heard you say that you birds were forced to flee the sky because of the bats.

Astra turned her head as if the rabbit had said something curious.

"I was wondering," said Gabriel, "why you were flying about in the night if it's so dangerous?"

"I'm careful that's all," she said nervously.

"Really? As you said before, it's pretty dangerous to be alone out here. And you just happened to spot us flying around?"

"You know curiosity killed the cat," said Astra.

"I'm not a cat. You're up to something. What's your trick?"

Astra tried to ignore Gabriel. The hare's words were piercing her conscience.

"Hey! Did you hear me?" shouted Gabriel, "What's your trick?"

Gabriel's hand went to his sword.

"Just be quiet."

"You seem agitated," Gabriel stated, "You know there's a saying: one who asks questions tends to find the truth about things."

"I told you to be quiet!"

"You are playing a trick! What have you done to my friends?"

The black hare swatted Astra over the head with the flat end of his sword. Instantly, the falcon did a barrel roll, sending Gabriel towards the earth with blistering speed. The falcon heard the screaming; it grew fainter and fainter with every second. Gabriel's pleas for mercy changed Astra's heart and she dove with all her speed for the falling hare. Just before he hit the ground, Astra caught him in her talons. She dropped him safely on the ground. Gabriel got up in a rage and ran forward with sword raised. However, Astra flew high in the air to evade Gabriel's attack.

"Come down and fight!"

"It's not wise to pick fights with those who are bigger than you," said Astra.

"When I have the chance to put my blade through you I won't hesitate. Traitors like you don't deserve to live."

In the blink of an eye, the large falcon came upon Gabriel with talons fully extended. She caught him with her right foot. Gabriel was promptly pinned to the ground. The rabbit's sword was a few inches away; he tried to grab it, but Astra pulled him away. Her grip was tight enough to keep Gabriel still, yet not so aggressively as to crush him. She threw her beak near Gabriel's face with such speed, that he thought she would tear him to pieces.

Astra, however, had no intention of doing so. All she wanted was for him to calm down, albeit that a large bird pinning you to the ground isn't such a calming thought.

"Now that you are quiet, I want to say something," replied Astra.

"My friends-"

"Yes, your friends are in danger and if we don't act quickly— they will die. I want to help. I'm not as cold-hearted as you think I am."

"And I suppose throwing me off was an act of kindness?" said Gabriel.

"Dranus wanted all of you at the city of Ishmalhal. I don't have time to explain much more. We must hurry or we'll be too late. Now I'm going to let you up. You have to trust

me for your friends' sake."

"Dranus?" said Gabriel, "Whose that?"

"No time to explain, what do you say?"

Gabriel thought briefly over the proposal, and coming to the conclusion that if he didn't comply all was lost, he agreed to trust her.

"All right, I'll trust you. But mark my words if you-"

"Enough talking!" Astra said cutting him short, "Get up, get your sword and come on!"

Astra stepped back off of Gabriel. The hare jumped up, picked up his sword, and stood as if he wanted to fight again. The falcon only looked at him with a blank expression.

Gabriel returned his blade back to its sheath, climbed on board the falcon, and both left the river posthaste. Along the way, Astra told Gabriel of her story, however, another group was headed to Ishmalhal as well and they were far ahead of Gabriel and Astra.



The ground quaked as Dranus ran apace along the darkened world. He was getting closer to his destination as he led the bats. Finally, he made it to the shore where the city stood. The bats went over to the city and circled it to ensure that there was no escape. No one in the city noticed, and the reveling went on as usual. On shore Dranus kicked back on his hind legs, stretched his wings, and whisked across the lake as a great black fog. The fog crept slowly over the supporting arches of the city. It took the city, from below, like a clawed hand and suddenly there was a quake.

Inside the city, the music came to an abrupt halt. It was an eerie silence, especially after what seemed like an eternity of music. It had been some time since the city had understood what silence was, and since it was the first time experiencing such a virtue, it placed a discomfort in their hearts. Some of the musicians tried to start a merry tune again, but even a greater quake emerged from under their feet. The fog pushed and twisted the city until it broke away from the arches. At first, the sudden weight seemed to heavy for the clawed hand, but it slowly pushed the city high into the sky.

A sudden scream gave way to a sudden stampede. Peppi and Ragel quickly found Samson and Gideon.

"What happening?" asked Peppi.

"I don't know," said Gideon, "I don't know."

Meanwhile, Gabriel and Astra finally made it to Ishmalhal. Both were surprised at what they saw.

"Oh no," replied Astra.

"Is that what the city looks like?" said Gabriel, "It doesn't look safe to me."

The bird flew closer to the city, but Vamp spotted her from afar. He rallied his force behind him. They came against the falcon with mouths open and fangs ready to tear the victim before them. Astra pressed forward, not changing her direction for a moment.

"I'm not the smartest hare in the world, but shouldn't we be fly away from them—especially the big bat there!"

"Draw your sword and hang on," Astra said, "We're going through."

As the two sides got closer, Gabriel lifted his sword, held his breath, and closed his eyes as Astra penetrated the legion of bats. Vamp went to take a bite out of the falcon, but the bird averted the attack. The hare swung erratically, unsure if he was hitting anything.

When they both emerged uninjured, Gabriel saw a trickle of gray blood on his sword. Astra flew up to the city and landed on top of one of the buildings. The crowds were still amok with fear. Gabriel looked around to see if he could spot Gideon and others.

"I don't see them. Try that street over there!"

The search went on, but as it did, the fog began to gradually turn the city sideways. Gideon and the others did their best to keep their footing. Wagons, crates, and creatures rolled one upon another into the water below. A balancing act from building to building was Astra's path, and avoiding the frequent falling debris was the most challenging of all. The bats were not far off; and knowing that this would cause the search to be impossible, Astra made one last attempt to spot the five. With a hard look, she spotted the four creatures.

"Over there, I've found them."

The four were stranded on the facade of a building: for the streets were now walls and the buildings were great stepping stones.

Astra hopped from each building until she made it to the four.

"Gabriel!" said Gideon, "Its good to see you."

"Same here," Gabriel said smiling, extending his hand.

"Hurry there's not much time, everyone crowd aboard."

Immediately the black claw released the city. The metropolis fell quickly and violently. Astra jumped clear and flew off. The city hit the water with a great splash, crumbling from the impact. Dranus spotted Astra heroic deed and sought to kill her, in his current form he gave chase behind the bats, who were already in pursuit.

"Everyone get a good grip," replied Astra, "Don't worry, I've got plenty of feathers to spare."

The falcon took a tremendous dive that was so fast and steep that the five thought they could not hold on.

A forest up ahead, gave Astra a chance to out-fly the bats. Peppi ,who had a full view, saw the bats gaining ground, and the black fog was right behind them. They entered the forest; the bats as well; and the fog when it touched the wood, began to destroy each tree, leaving it as salt. Astra pushed her flight to its limits. Trees came at her as if they were appearing out of thin air. The five hung on for dear life with the bats closer still. A few of them were nipping at Astra's tail feathers, hoping to slow her down, but Samson's arrows kept them at bay. One, however, managed to take hold of her leg; and taking its teeth, sunk them deep. A high shriek came from the bird, prompting Gabriel to action: he took his sword to drive the beast away, but in the process he was bitten and fell back in pain. Gideon finally finished off the foe with the swift action of his sword.



The forest was coming to an end, but Astra knew she couldn't keep up her speed. Yet God didn't miss them, and He knew that the bird was losing ground. From the moon the Holy One caused a very faint beam of light to rest, like a wall, at the end of the wood. The falcon flew through it without even noticing it, and the bats came through as well. But the fog stopped short of the light, for it could pass through nor go around it. The menacing cloud withdrew away over the nearest hill out of sight, knowing; that when resisted, he must flee when God draws near.

The Lord, not forgetting the bats, dealt with them quickly; and this is how He did it. As Astra's flight became slower, the bats thought that her death, along with five would be imminent. The five could not defend themselves against such a large army and all hope, as they perceived it, was lost. The Lord was working in the minds of all the bats. He wiped clear the memory of the bats so that they all landed and sat around wondering why they were pursuing the falcon in the first place. The Holy One held their minds captive for an hour and then returned their reasoning, but by that time the falcon and the five were long gone.

Chapter 14: The Flock of Brunehaven

The bird didn't stop flying until she was sure the bats would not follow, but her fears were unfounded: for the Lord had all ready dealt with the matter. Her landing was awkward and the five tumbled to the ground. It took some time for all of them to regain their composure from the chase; but when Gabriel held up his bloody arm, Gideon and the others rushed over to aid him. Once Gabriel's arm was bound, everyone went over to thank Astra for her heroic feat.

"That was some flying!" Ragel said with a smile

"Yeah if it wasn't for you, we would be dead," replied Gideon.

Gabriel knew different. He gave the bird a dirty look.

"How's the leg?" asked Peppi.

"It hurts a little, but I'll be fine," said Astra, "But my left wing has lost a few feathers, flying will be difficult."

The five continue to shower accolade after accolade on her. Gabriel couldn't believe his eyes and ears. If they only knew what she was planning to do and who her allegiance was sworn to, then they would change their tune.

"A hero like you deserves a medal," said Peppi.

"Thank you," said Astra, "but---

"Hero?" Gabriel said coming forward, " She's no hero. She's a dirty bird!"

Gideon walked over to Gabriel.

"Don't start again Gabriel."

"She set us up! We were suppose to die in that city. We wouldn't be in this predicament if it wasn't for her."

Gideon had an expression of doubt on his face.

"Gideon, I'm not lying," Gabriel said, "Go and ask her yourself."

Gideon returned to the bird. Peppi was still inspecting her wounds."

"We can't get those wounds fixed here," said Peppi.

"There is a place where we can go," said Astra standing on one leg, " I'll be able to make it there with all of you."

Gideon jumped into the conversation. He wasted no time with words.

"Astra, Gabriel tells me that you are on the side of Dranus. Is that true?"

The falcon was quite for some time, which told more about her than the answer she gave.

Peppi and Ragel stepped back.

"Do—do you believe his word over mine, I saved you."

"I trust his word more than yours; that city was pure trash. Maybe you are up to

something.”

"You have to understand— " Astra said hurriedly.

"Don't lie," shouted Gabriel, "Tell the truth."

The falcon lowered her head.

"Yes its true, but-"

Peppi and Ragel walked away, and seeing this reminded Astra of her loneliness from her own kind.

"No, wait," she said hopping forward, "I'm sorry. It was wrong--I know that now."

The five continued to walked away. Astra caught a glimpse of Gabriel grabbing his arm; and using it to regain respect among the group, she brought to light the terrible fate awaiting Gabriel.

"What about the young hare?" Astra said, "He needs help. He won't survive with a cut like that. We both need to get to Brunehaven.”

Gideon turned around briefly taking into consideration the bird's warning.

"Ignore her," said Peppi.

"But she's right," said Gideon, "None of us know where to go. How bad is the arm, Gabriel?"

"Real bad," the hare said cringing, "it stings."

"All right, you've got our attention, but only for Gabriel's sake. What is this Brunehaven?"

"It's probably another lie," said Peppi.

"No, it is a city of birds. It lies within a mountain. It is a city where we birds fly in peace and with a sad heart. It is there where we can get treatment for our cuts.”

"She's forgetting something," replied Gabriel, " She's a traitor to her own kind. I doubt they will listen to her."

"That might be true," Astra said taking a deep breath, "but they'll help you none the less.”

"I don't trust her: once a servant of Dranus, always a servant of Dranus," said Samson, "When you do wrong all trust is lost.”

"Have we not wronged God in our lives, Samson?" said Gideon, "He forgave us. I say we give her another chance."

Samson dropped his head in retrospect. He remembered his time as a judge and remembered how God, despite not deserving it, gave him mercy and restored his lost sight.

"You're right," he said, "You're right. Fine, let's find this Brunehaven.”



It was agreed that Astra would be given another chance, and everyone crowded upon her back. The flight was sluggardly due to Astra's injuries. She had to stop once in awhile to regain her strength for the next flight. After hours in the air, they began to see something against the dark background of the sky. The snowy, white caps and rocky slopes became visible as the moonlight revealed it. There was a cave entrance, whose girth diminished the size of the six, that sat high from the mountain's base. Astra flew in. It was dark, for a moment, and with the gift of seeing in the dark, the whole cave became apparent to all of them. Everyone could hear the thunderous noise of chirps and squawking. The sound grew as Astra flew further in. The falcon maneuvered around a labyrinth of stalagmites until they came upon another opening. Through that opening hundreds of birds were

flying about. There were albatrosses, pelican, herons, geese, ducks, vultures, curassows, quails, pheasants, and barbets just to name a few. Some passed by slowly, while others whipped by like rockets. The birds had their own pattern of flight as not to bump into one another; this being a trial and error routine, which resulted in many bruised noggins until the pattern was perfected.

In the cavern wall, hundreds of barrows were formed giving the birds a place to nest and raise young. Astra descended to the ground, taking care not to crash into anyone, in a circular pattern until she grounded awkwardly. The mountain floor was for birds that could not fly or flew for short periods. It was evident that Astra was one of the largest birds. Most of the ones on the mountain floor were slightly smaller than the rabbits. Gabriel was helped off by his friends. The small birds crowded around the strange visitors. Ragel pulled out his axe.

"Put it away," cried Astra, "They won't hurt you."

From the crowd came a fat hen named Hagabel. Most of the birds quickly moved out of her way; for her corpulent frame typically caused other birds to be tossed about mercilessly to the ground. Upon seeing Astra, Hagabel lowered her head in a challenging manner. She was ready to unleash her cutting tongue which she was known for; and no bird, how large or small, could ever escape it.

"Astra! Surprise, surprise," said the hen bobbing her head, "What right do you have to return here? You were forbidden to come back to Brunehaven."

"A friend of mine is hurt," replied Astra, "Brunehaven was the best place for me to bring him to."

"Oh, I see," said the hen, "Using others for your own benefit again. Knowing you, you're up to no good as usual."

A response was making its way from Astra's beak, but the sudden movement of the smaller birds held her vicious comment in secret. All of the birds began to crowd Gabriel and the other four. A kiwi, who was quite curious, began to pull at Gabriel's jacket. Gabriel swiped him away. The birds jumped backwards almost in unison, surprised by the rabbits' reaction.

"He's a little edgy isn't he?" replied the kiwi.

Most of the birds agreed, nodding their heads as one. Hagabel not overly impressed by the strangers, returned her focus on Astra.

"When are you leaving Astra, and make it quick, the sooner you leave the better."

"And the sooner you lose some of your poundage, the ground will be a safer place for these birds to walk upon."

The fat hen stood agape, sunk her head down into her feathery frill, and jarred with such extremity that many thought that she would explode in a burst of feathers.

"You dare to insult me with--with--with insults!" screeched the hen.

She left the scene, to the joy of everyone, knocking a few birds to ground as she went.

Now with the hen's exit, the birds were even more curious of the strangers. The five were pushing birds to the left and right just to get some space.

"Back," shouted Peppi, pushing one bird to the side, "back I say! Give us some room."

As the falcon watched the five get acquainted with the birds, her mind brought her back to that dreadful day when she was exiled from Brunehaven. The accusations and the

name calling was all too familiar; and although she was glad that only one of them attempted to conjure up old feelings, Astra still had to see the leader of the flock. "I'm going to see Tion," she said addressing everyone, "I hope he will listen to me. Just stay here until I come back.

"That won't be a problem," Gideon said as the birds continued to crowd them.



As Astra took to flight once again, none of the birds paid any attention to her as she approached a large hollow in the cavern of the mountain. The cave was surrounded by hieroglyphics of three birds. There were torches that lit the cave with a grayish hue, which gave the cavity a daunting appearance. Once inside, Astra slowly approached a large bald eagle that sat in a decorative nest. He looked to be sleeping; for his head was buried under his wing, but another bird flew up from behind. Upon seeing her, it approached her quickly as if to assail her. This snowy owl, named Ruffletin, (for some of his feathers stuck out from his neck to form a ruffle) accosted Astra; and despite his smaller stature, Ruffletin's piercing look was enough to make Astra lower her head in reverence immediately.

The owl was an adviser to the bald eagle. Ruffletin usually reminded the birds of Brunehaven of the rules passed down by their ancestors. He would always say that they must follow the rules exactly or risk banishment. The owl looked at the falcon with his big saucer-like eyes, and began to rebuke her severely.

"You have a lot of nerve showing up here after what you did," replied the owl.

"The only reason I sided with the Dranus was to give the skies back to us. I did it for all the birds of Brunehaven."

"Your logic is just as foul as your presence," replied the owl, "You are in league with the one who put us in this place. We have been flying in this cave for years, only going out for food and even then some of us don't come back. You are a traitor. You are banished by the law of Brunehaven, now leave!"

"Let me explain," she said.

"There nothing to explain!" said Ruffletin raising his voice, "Now get out, Astra, or I will strike you down!"

"Ruffletin," came a voice from the back of the cave, "Leave her be."

The owl turned to his leader.

"Sir," he said tip-toeing over to the nest, "you know the rules. She has come back to ask for a pardon - a weak attempt if you ask me. The moment we forgive her, is the moment we'll regret it. Sir, my advice would be—"

"No advice needed, Ruffletin," said the eagle.

Tion rose from his nest, and walked over to Astra. The bald eagle was the largest of both birds. He looked at Astra with concern; he saw the cuts on her leg.

"You're bold for coming back, and in returning you brought wounds from a battle. Was it the bats?"

Astra answered the question by dropping her head slowly.

"I'm not the only one who is hurt," she said, "There is a young hare who has--"

"Hare?" Tion said cutting her short, "How did you come upon this creature?"

"I'd rather not say," Astra said nervously.

"I'd rather not say?" the owl replied in a mocking tone, "Sir cast her out. She's up to no good, I tell you. Can't you see she's playing games?"

Tion paid no attention to Ruffletin and continued with his questions.

"Since you won't answer my last question, then how about this one: Where is the hare?"

"Here, on the mountain floor. Four others are with him, can you help him?"

Ruffletin nudged his way in between the two to break the conversation.

"Sir," he said looking at Tion, "She's a traitor, by the rules mind you; she has no voice here. I'm sorry if a hare is in trouble, but the rules are the rules."

The eagle glowered at the owl; who after realizing the his leader's look was not a pleasant one, began to scoot backwards. Tion turned his attention outside of the hollow.

"Follow me, both of you."

The three birds left the cave, and went to the mountain floor. The small birds moved out the way to make room for the three. The birds above ended their flight at the sight of the leader, and joined the others below. All was quiet for sometime. Tion saw the creatures of color; he also saw the black hare holding his arm tightly.

"Are you the one Astra has told me about?"

"If its good I am; if its bad I am not." said Gabriel.

The eagle laughed. He went over to look at Gabriel's arm. The wound was deep and from the looks of it, it was showing signs of infection.

"So what do you think?" replied Gideon.

"How did this happen?"

"We were attacked by the bats near the city of Ishmalhal." Astra said.

Ruffletin came to accost Astra, but Tion gave him a look to tell him to stay put and be quiet. Tion asked Astra to explain further; and after the story, there was no doubt that the falcon had done a good thing in saving the four from the city.

"So can you help us?" Astra said.

"Astra your wounds will heal easily, but," Tion said with a pause, "I have nothing to help the rabbit. We can only ease his pain."

"Wait, there's nothing--nothing at all!" cried Gideon.

"No, I'm sorry. We birds are immune to a bat's nasty bite, but to any other creature all the germs are just like venom. All I can do is to send the humming birds to gather berries needed to make a balm. Once the balm is applied to your arm, the juice will num the pain."

The eagle's words were cold, but true. They left a deep sorrow in everyone's heart of what was to become of the black hare. No one said anything in order not to arouse any more feelings of pity for Gabriel. Gideon put his hand on Gabriel's shoulder, and he planted his head into his teacher shoulder; both could hardly hold back the tears.

The hummingbirds were sent out promptly and returned safely. The berries were applied to Gabriel's arm and it did alleviate the pain as Tion said. The eagle brought the five to his cave. Ragel and Peppi went to sleep. Samson, Gideon, Gabriel, sat together. Gideon knowing the inevitable, tried to steer his pupil in the right direction.

"Gabriel we need to talk. I'll be frank with you, it would behoove you to trust God immediately."

The black hare was silent.

“This is no longer a choice—you will die. I pleading with you,” Gideon said passionately,
“ Give you life to God---Trust Him!”

“No!” shouted the young hare, with such force that it could have shaken the mountain
itself.

Gideon backed away, shedding a tear as he did, and left the hare alone. Gabriel sat along
the wall quietly.

Gideon along with Samson recited a Shavronite poem to aid the impending sorrow:

The Lord is not slack in life
The Lord is not unjust in his ways
With Him I shall have no strife
As I live the short and humble days

Pain and woe will come
Trial and storm for sure
They may be burdensome
But God is always the cure

Gabriel heard every word, although he pretended that he did not; but as he did he felt
strange- almost sick at times. His vision became blurry. He shook his head, and his sight
became clear again: there was no doubting that the infection was taking its toll.

Chapter 15: Gabriel’s Dream

Outside of the cave, Ruffetin, Astra, and Tion along with the other birds, were doing a
little reciting of there own, but it was far from ideas of the Holy One.

"I still stand by the rules, Tion," replied Ruffletin, "Astra has done a good thing by saving
the strangers’ lives, but that doesn’t excuse her from her disobedience. She is no longer
one of us.”

"I thought that Dranus would give us back the skies if I helped him," Astra replied.

Tion looked at the falcon with concern.

"My dear falcon, the Fallen is about one thing: destruction. He does not care about you or
anything else, only himself he seeks. The stories of old speak of this, and we all know
that they are true. He wants all creation to be under him, even the Creator Himself.”

When Tion mention the Creator, Astra immediately expounded that Gideon had spoke of
Him as well.

"These five may have a greater purpose than we know,” said Tion, “ but let us get back to
the issue at hand. Astra, you did not come back just for the rabbit’s sake.”

“No,” she said slowly, “I want to come back to Brunehaven. Although I have flown away
from the dark walls of this mountain, I carried a heavy heart knowing that you all were
still here. I come to ask for forgiveness. Tion, as our leader, I implore you to look beyond
my naive actions. I extend my words to my fellow friends of Brunehaven as well. Forgive
me.”

"Don't listen to her!" shouted Ruffletin, "I do not believe this. Sir, do you think a few pitiful words will change her treachery?"

Tion thought for a moment. He looked at Astra and saw all her treachery. His eyes went to Ruffletin.

"The rules are the rules," said the owl.

The moment of judgment was at hand and Tion gave his answer.

"She will stay."

Ruffletin's feathers stood on end and his eyes were much larger than before.

"But sir," he cried, "She has broken the rules! She turned away from this flock and sided with Dranus---that dragon"

"Haven't we all sided with Dranus with out sins?" said Tion astutely.

Ruffletin, knowing that was the truth, looked around with some mortification.

"That's not the point," he said, "She is an anathema—a reject to this flock and any other creature for that matter."

"I know the rules just as you do; for you remind me constantly to my agitation!"

exclaimed the eagle, "I will forgive her and allow her back in the flock not because of her attempts to right the wrong or because of her intentions to help the hare. There is another rule, Ruffletin, that you have forgotten that we birds must remember: *Those who ask for forgiveness shall receive it.*"

Ruffletin was surprised that he had forgotten that rule; for he made it his duty to remember all of them. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Well, I guess- I guess you're right.."

"No bird will use the past to berate Astra in any way," said Tion, "Birds of Brunehaven do not look on with spite at Astra. Do not treat her ill-willed any longer. I, Tion, have forgiven her. However, what will you do?"

There was a low murmur among the birds until a pelican, name Gurplebill, spoke up.

"I'll forgive her. She was not the first of us to fall under the trick of the unicorn. It was a bird that was led to the glowing pool first."

Slowly the other birds agreed. There was cheering (more like chirping) and Astra was apart of Brunehaven once again. In the cave, Gabriel's infection was becoming worst. His mouth was dry and his vision continued to blur constantly. He called out to Gideon.

Gideon, as well as they others, came to his side.

"He's burning up!" Gideon cried, "What should I do?"

"I don't--I don't know." said Samson.

"I not feeling well," said Gabriel, "I- I think the balm--"



All Gabriel could remember was his teacher crying out to him before he passed out. Slowly the darkness cleared away and he awoke to find himself in a different place. It was dream-like, but it felt real to him. He was lying in an open field that had grass of emerald. The weather was warm; and the sunlight shone with a glorious brightness. He concluded that he was not in the world of night any longer. Death, at first, passed through his mind, but Gideon had always told him that it was once to live and then the judgment. The hare, with his ignorance knew he had not lived a good life to be in such a wonderful

place. The emerald field stretched as far as he could see. He got up to get a feel of his surroundings, and saw a small tree up on a hill. In fact, it was an apple tree, which was a delight; for Gabriel was starving. His stomach began to grumble.

"Quiet you," he said to his stomach.

He began to walk forward and then he saw something he hadn't before. A creature, which he could not distinguish yet, was reclined at the tree. The creature was bright like a candle flame, and Gabriel could only describe this creature as Light. He continued to walk, but an obstacle separated him and the tree. A ten foot crack was between him and the apples. The fruit was looking more delicious with every second and the hare's stomach was beginning to annoy him.

"It doesn't look that far of a jump. I'll give it a try."

"I would think before you do. You should listen to Me," said the creature by the tree, **"That crack is larger than you think. Do not try to cross it on your own."**

"Don't worry, I'm a rabbit," Gabriel said proudly, " We were made for jumping."

"I know you rabbits are made for a task such as this- I made you that way. But if you try it you will see that my side will draw back one hundred feet when your foot touches the edge on your side. You will fall to your doom and will die; but if you listen and trust me, you will get to Me safety and enjoy some good fruit too."

"You have to trust yourself." said Gabriel

"This is no time for comedy," replied the creature laughing. **"If you want to live trust in Me."**

Gabriel thought for a moment and concurred.

"Well, what do I do?"

"You'll have to have faith and take my hand." said the creature

"It won't work," Gabriel said, "Are you sure?"

"As sure as when I guided you all across to the world of night. Step to the edge and I will show you."

Gabriel did so. Instantly, the ten foot crack expanded to a chasm impossible to jump. The side where the apple tree grew was one hundred feet away. Before Gabriel could say another word, the creature trotted over the chasm very calmly as if he was on solid ground. Gabriel was stunned. He had never seen anything so amazing as this. As the creature got closer, Gabriel manage to distinguish the creature was shaped like a red panda, but its countenance was that of light and flame that was so magnificent that Gabriel turned in fear.

"Stand," said the red panda helping him to his feet.

Once to his feet again, and for the first time, he knew that he was standing in front of something greater than himself. He opened his hand.

"Take my hand and I will lead you across."

"I can't I'll fall. Its impossible." said Gabriel.

"Yes," the panda said with a grin, **"For you all things are, but with Me it will be as if you only took a step."**

"What if I fall?" Gabriel said.

"What if you make it over?" replied the panda.

Gabriel looked down into the chasm. It was a dark abyss, which put fear into the rabbit's heart.

"Don't look at that," said the panda, **"Keep you focus on Me and you will make it."**

Gabriel reluctantly placed his hand into the panda's.

"Ready?"

"Uh-- sure." said Gabriel apprehensively.

The panda stepped forward, but Gabriel held firm in place. He was still afraid of taking the step.

"Plan on moving?" replied the panda look at him curiously.

Gabriel looked more worried than ever.

"Gideon is right when he prays that you need faith, for I see you have none," said the red panda.

"He prays for me?" Gabriel said surprised from the thought. "He usually just grunts when I do something wrong."

" He prays for you every night. I put it in his heart to care for you. He sees great things in you, Gabriel, because I put it in you. And I will have you to do great things. Let's start by honoring your teacher's request: Take the step of faith."

The hare finally made up in his mind to do it, and the moment Gabriel placed his foot over the edge; the side, where the apple tree was, it came over before he took the second step. Gabriel stood still like a statue. The panda tossed him apple. It bounced off his head; for he was still dumbfounded by what took place. Gabriel picked up the apple and took a bite. The nectar was a little sour but not in a bad way, it was a taste to heightened his sense: it was the best apple he had ever tasted.

"Can I have another apple, they're great!"

"As much as you like."

"I like you," said Gabriel, "I want to know your name."

"There is a lie in your speech," said the panda, **"your heart says you do not like me—in fact you hate Me, and you hardly care to know my name."**

Gabriel gave this creature a long look, trying to understand who had the authority to read the heart of any creature. God is the one who can do such things; he sees what we really think and Gabriel was receiving a taste of it. He saw the hare's bewilderment and began to state the purpose of Gabriel's visit.

"I am Glory," said the red panda, **"My Father and I called you into the world of night to make you the first king of Shavron. You have a grand battle ahead of you, and I will teach you how to fight."**



"I already know how to do battle," Gabriel said, "I don't need anymore lessons."

A smile came over the red panda's face.

"Your battle is not with flesh and bone, nor will your weapon be iron. This battle is of a deeper kind: where spirit meets with spirit and light meets with darkness. You have no skills in this area."

Gabriel continued to listen.

"First you need to change, to trust Me. Your hatred for Me will ruin you and the ruin is great. When I made you, I made you to know Me, to worship Me, and to

show others how to.”

“But what about the poison,” said Gabriel.

“I’m holding it at bay, and I will heal you if you believe I can.”

“I saw you walk over a chasm, and you helped me across—you can do anything.”

Glory smiled and said,

“I can do a lot more than heal you. Do you believe this?”

“Yes,” said Gabriel.

“Now, let me tell something about the world of night. Everything you have experienced is a living parable. The world of night is the soul of any creature who rejects Me. The soul becomes the home of Dranus, and he seeks to completely murder that soul with sin. That is why the world is bland---without color. The soul cannot get rid of him no matter how hard an effort is given to do so.”

“So how do you get rid of him?”

“When I am invited into the soul of any creature. I will come and will make the night day. Dranus will flee and I will change that soul to act just like Me.”

“Will everyone turn to you?” asked Gabriel.

“No.” said Glory.

The longer Gabriel was around Glory the better he felt, he did want to leave---not ever.

Glory spoke again.

“I will give you my sword. It is the only weapon that can protect you from Dranus. If you keep the weapon I give you and listen to Me, you shall never fall,” Glory said pointing at Gabriel, **“ This sword is the word of My Father and His word is truth. Dranus cannot stand against it.”**

Glory rose to his feet and Gabriel did the same.

“I charge you, Gabriel of the Crosslands, to by the first king of Shavron,” said Glory looking Gabriel in the eye, **“I will give you of My spirit and it will reside in you. I will teach you righteousness and judgment so that the offspring of Shavron will follow the Holy One unlike their parents. You will be a foreshadowing of Me; for I will come one day and rescue the world from sin, so that whoever believes on Me will not perish in their sins by the wrath of God.”**

It was then that Glory gave Gabriel the precise direction to find the sword---it was a test of faith. There was a secret in the world of night that even Dranus didn’t know about. A cave, along the mountainside of Brunehaven, held a small pond of glowing water. The entrance was hidden by a boulder. In Gabriel’s eyes the boulder would shine like silver, but to no one else. Once Gabriel found the pool he was to place his hand in the water and pull out the sword. It would be then, and only then, that the birds of Brunehaven would offer their assistance against the bats. He also told Gabriel specific directions of how to find Ivronel’s lair.

“So how am I going to get in the cave if its blocked?”

“All you have to do is ask,” Glory said,

“This sounds simple enough,” said Gabriel, “Just walk around the mountain, find the

boulder, put my hand in this glowing water, a sword comes out, and then we fight some nasty old bats."

"Yes, simple enough. Are you ready to wake up?"

"To be honest with you, I really do want to leave." replied Gabriel.

Glory smiled; for he loved the young hare.

"I will be with you Gabriel."

Suddenly the grand scenery began to melt away around Gabriel. The entire landscape was beginning to fade into the memory of his mind like vapor. Gabriel had the sensation that he was lying down again. He saw the head of two creatures looking over him. Gideon appeared and then Samson.

"He's alive," exclaimed Peppi, "Thank goodness."

"No," said Samson, "Thank God."

Gabriel's arm was healed, true to what Glory said, and he felt as if he had never been sick at all. Springing to his feet he ran to the entrance to the cave, with Gideon and Samson asking questions.

Chapter 16: The World of Night Begins to Change

Down below in Dranus lair, the bats shook with fear.

"Success of failure?" said Dranus.

Vamp was apprehensive to speak, and would have held his peace if not for the glaring eye of his master.

"We don't know," he said quickly, hoping he would not have to speak again.

"What do you mean you don't know?" he said irately.

The bat said nothing.

"You are making me repeat myself again?" said Dranus, "If my question is not answered swiftly, I shall strike you dead."

"I don't remember anything much." said Vamp stammering, "We were right on Astra's tail and suddenly all of us forgot why we were chasing her in the first place."

Dranus let a deep and gurgling sigh.

"Useless," he said, "Utterly useless."

Dranus ordered his minions to leave him be, and they gladly left in haste. The unicorn knew far too well what had stopped him from killing Astra and the three strangers. That moonlight was no ordinary presence: the hand of God had abridged him as it had many times before---and he hated God even more for it. The reach of the Holy One has no limit; no matter if it's a small ordeal or great, He is there. This truth rang true in the mind of Ivronel as he left the lair and trotted slowly over the gray plains under the moon.

However his humbling walk gave way to an even further epiphany. A patch of grass caught his eye that put such a fright in him that he tip toe towards it to inspect the sight. The patch was no larger than his hoof, but it was green. The unicorn shook his head in disbelief, and promptly placed his hoof over it, turning it back to an ashy gray.



Yet his attempt was futile, for that patch of gray grass returned to its lively green. The

unicorn marched on, trying to forget the incident, but his walk revealed to him that there were more patches of green throughout the plains. They were beginning to appear all around him.

With pure hatred and with rampant speed, he went from patch to patch, stomping on them all; but the more effort he gave, the more green returned just a fast.

In a fit of agitation, he ran off and the color followed him overtaking him like a wave, until the gray plain utterly vanished. The very sight of the color engender a spell of sickness, for he knew what this occurrence meant; and God was letting him know who will always be in control. Despite the truth in front of him, the beast's reprobate mind quickly squashed the very notion that he was on the losing end.

"No--no matter," said Dranus defiantly toward the sky, " I will not concede. The children are mine and this world is mine! I reign and am the god of this world of night and I will fight You forever to retain my grip over every soul here!"

Suddenly to his right appeared a majestic pillar of light. The light stood boldly upon the ridge of the hill overlooking the beast. The light moved forward with a smooth pace.

Dranus's legs, that seemed to be pillars of might, immediately buckled. Glory drew closer still, sparing the beast not a moment to regain his stature. The unicorn lowered his head and covered his face with its wings. His muscles began to twitch violently, forcing him to reveal his true form: velvet skin hardened into a myriad of scales; hoofs separated into individual talons; and his wings, that were already deformed, took to the extremity as if purely rotten. Glory stood still looking on the cowering behemoth with righteous indignation, and gave liberty for it to speak.

"Speak, dragon--murderer of the soul---liar of all liars."

Dranus, now in the form of his eternal depravity, parted his wings slightly to create a gap for him to peek through. One of its bright and malevolent eyes held that foreboding terror of being in the presence of divinity, and knowing that it would destroy him when the time came. Finding words, which were far and few, the beast spoke.

"You are the Beginning and the End and the Son of the Holy One. Why have you come to assail me, Son of God?" said the dragon, "Why have you come to torment me? Hold me no longer. Let me flee, I beseech you, hold me no longer! Can you not see that this world is mine and all in it---for their ancestors followed me. Let me keep my right to my treasure."

After the speech, the beast closed his flimsy veil, awaiting the word of God.

"You are a liar and the maker of it," said Glory, "Your right was gained by deceit and even now your possession is only due to hatred of Me and My Father. Flee as you may, but you flight will come to an end very soon."

Immediately, the beast drew back (as far as he could), transforming back into a unicorn. Dranus galloped away in a frantic manner, never looking back.

Glory went about His work. The grass, that was already green, seemed to become brighter wherever He went. The Maestro went to work like a conductor of a grand orchestra using hues instead of instruments. The grass beneath him, the leaves above, and the wind followed his every gesture. At the command of pointing at a gray bush or tree, the subject would dispel that dead color to take on the natural and true hue. He pointed to

the moon, and as his finger moved down towards the horizon, the moon followed until it was out of sight; and then, like the change of a composition from one movement to another, he brought up a sun; and the darkened sky, that had reigned for hundreds of years, was now alive with majestic blue.

Now as this was happening, this left many creatures in the world of night terror stricken. Some ran into their homes and locked their doors; others fainted from the drastic change to their surroundings. It was truly an awesome sight! However, for the moment, the change did not effect the creatures themselves.

When the colony of dogs had seen what was happening, they met by Ananias's hut to inquire of him. The old wolfhound came out with his walking stick and began to take everything in. A Scottish Terrier spoke up from among the crowd.

"Ananias- what is the meaning of this?"

With a smile the wolfhound said,

"Our freedom draws near."

Glory continued to conduct, bringing life back to the dead world. Suddenly, he stood straight as an arrow with his arms raised; hands ready for the finale. He lowered his arms and bowed his head. The symphony had ended; color had returned. Glory looked around, satisfied with his work, and disappeared out of sight.

Chapter 17: The Glowing Pool Found

"You want us to do what?," screeched the snowy owl, "Go against the Dranus and the bats—insanity!"

"Ruffletin is right," replied Tion, "I will not risk the flock over a dream."

Gabriel quickly jumped in front of the eagle, which took Tion by surprise.

"It was more than a dream," said Gabriel, "All of you just follow me outside the mountain and I'll prove that what I say is true."

"Gabriel's arm is evidence enough for me," said Gideon coming Gabriel's aid, "We all saw the infection. You said he had no hope of recovery and now his arm is completely fit. Secondly, if he did see the Holy One's Son, I will not doubt Gabriel's words or God's."

The speech, although noble and honest, was not falling on valiant hearts. The birds of Brunehaven, above all creatures in the world of night, feared Dranus. Even Astra whose deed could be described as nothing less than courageous, stood silently overlooking the two hares. Again the plea for action was given; again it was taken with much reluctance.

"An idle dream, that all it is," replied Ruffletin.

Samson came forward with Ragel and Peppi.

"Enough of the debate," replied Samson, "There are children that are captive. They are afraid alone and above they need our help. Now my friend here," he said referring to Gabriel, "Says he knows the way and will have a weapon to get us there. I say we give him a chance. If he's wrong then what he has said has been an idle dream. If he's right we all become a little wiser and the truth will be known. I beseech you, Tion, listen to him."

The bald eagle paced back and forth along the mountain floor, musing over the proposal. He stopped with his back turned and spoke.

"If this cave does exist, and you show me the sword, we will follow this Son of the Holy

One you speak of.

The birds of Brunehaven were in an uproar. They were not willing to assent to their leader's rash decision. Hagabel, feeling that it was her duty to bring the bird to his sense, came forward to speak.

"The unicorn is not to be reckoned with, Tion," she said walking up to him, " he has left us alone all these years. Let us not test the waters."

"He is the reason why we fly in the cave in the first place," replied Tion.

"I still say we should ignore the rabbit. Who here is willing to face death over a dream?"

Hagabel was quite influential: some of the birds began to side with the fat hen. Astra stepped forward to tip the scales back to Tion; and Hagabel, if she could, would have given the falcon a good pecking.

"Hagabel, the unicorn is the one who forced us here. Staying here is what he wants, he doesn't care if we all starve to death or ripped to shreds by the bats. It's time to take back what was ours. I know all of you are tired of this mountain. Let us at least see if what Gabriel says is true; and if it is, I say we fight for the skies again."

Most of the congregation gave a terrific cheer, and it was enough to sway the opinion to Tion and hold the tongue of the fat hen.

"Worthy words from a worthy bird," replied Tion.

"Fine," said Hagabel relenting, " but I'm not fit for flying."

"We can all see that." returned Astra.

The crowd snickered and the fat hen pointed her beak in the air and shuffled her heavy self back into the crowd, knocking some birds over in the process.

"All right, Gabriel, you have your wish," said Tion, "You can ride on my back."



Gabriel got aboard. Gideon and Samson rode with Astra. Peppi rode with a hawk, and Ragel rode with Ruffletin. Out they went, with other birds following, and to their astonishment they found that the night sky was gone. All of them were jubilant to see the blue sky and the colorful world. The birds wanted to fly forever among the clouds, but a more important issue as to be dealt with.

The birds landed near the mountain's base. Gabriel jumped off and proceeded to look for the shining boulder. He scrambled along the rocky slope dismissing the others remarks about how foolish he looked or about certain boulders they thought was the right one.

Gabriel heard the murmuring, complaining, and the sighs as he passed from one boulder to another.

"See, it was all in his head," replied Ruffletin to Tion, " This is not real."

Suddenly there came a shout of joy from Gabriel.

"Here it is!"

Everyone ran up to meet him. The boulder that was there was nearly obscure. It looked like it was apart of the mountain itself. In Gabriel's eyes, the boulder did exactly what was told to him: it shined like silver in the morning. However, to everyone else it was just an old rock.

"How do you know that this is the right one?" asked Tion.

"Believe me," Gabriel said with a grin, "This is it."

"Now what?" said Peppi.

“We have to move it,” said Gideon, “ Samson.”

The wolf took hold of the boulder and with all his strength, but to the dismay of the others, the rock did not move.

“I’m usually able to move any object.” said the wolf.

Gabriel had an inkling of what to do, but he could not remember. He scratched his head, and then it came to him. “Of course,” he thought, “He told me to ask.” Gabriel did exactly that and after the last syllable, there was a crackle that was so sudden that it made everyone jump back from the boulder. Then a strange grumble came from the mountain and the boulder crumbled right in front of them. A large dark opening awaited them.

Gabriel, climbing over the rubble, slowly made his way over to the cave.

“Wait,” Gideon said pulling his sword, “ I’ll come with you.”

" No, I was told to go alone."

"There could be danger," said Gideon.

"True, but you said it yourself: God will be our guide in the trouble. I- I trust Him, Gideon. I trust Him with everything!"

Gideon, surprised by his pupil’s change of perspective, gave a nod and Gabriel entered the cave.

"You shouldn’t have let him go alone," said Ragel.

Gideon lowered his head, as if remembering his struggle during the time of Shavron’s rebirth, and replied to the dog's complaint.

"Well, there were times when I did things that some thought I should not, but the Holy One always made me understand that I couldn't go wrong by obeying Him. Gabriel is different. He was always so against the notion of God, but now- he’s different. This wasn't done by a dream, but by the Lord Himself."

The multitude watched and waited for the black hare to return. Inside, the cave was darker than Gabriel wanted it to be, but after his eyes adjusted to allow him to see, navigation through the darkness became easy. A maze of stone greet him. Pillars of stalagmites towered high above him as water dripped down creating small pools of water. Gabriel made his way deeper inside, looking for that glowing pool. The entrance was far behind him, and the voices of his friends, that gave him some comfort, faded away. Gabriel was becoming more apprehensive with every moment, the specific pool was nowhere in sight. Up ahead the cave floor sloped down. Gabriel crept up to the edge, and looking down into the deep darkness, he shuddered from the thought of going down. It would have been better to have the pool in a safer place, but without challenges nothing can be accomplished; and Gabriel knew he had to make the move.



Gabriel went up to the edge again, looked over, and walked away. He took a moment to gather himself and finally made up his mind to go down. He inched over and slowly descended into the deep. He quickly found out that the slope was slippery. He tried to be careful, but lost his footing, causing him to slide. Downward he slid, nearly hitting a few rocks on the way down, until he ended near something that was very bright. Gabriel tip-toed over to the strange wonder before him; and there, clear and bright, was the pool.

The light pulsated, giving a glimpse of light every few seconds. The hare stood over the pool agape from the sight. Remembering what he was commanded to do, he rolled back

his sleeve and slowly stuck his hand inside the water. The moment he did the pool stopped pulsating. Suddenly light appeared throughout the whole cave. Gabriel began to pull his arm out of the pool. As he did, the water formed into a bright, single-handed double edged sword. The blade itself was pure light, untarnished by the world of night. Gabriel shook as he held the sword in his hand. His hand quivered from the overwhelming power that saturated the weapon. He swung the blade a few times, watching the particles fling into the air, yet returning to the blade as if magnetized. "This is amazing," he said, laughing.

"I know," came a voice behind him.

Glory smiled as he looked over his warrior. Gabriel knelt down in worship.

"Rise."

"How do I use this thing?" said Gabriel standing to his feet. "It's all weird looking and---"

"I will teach you," said Glory placing his hands on Gabriel's shoulder. "**That blade cuts deeper than just flesh and bone: it cuts as deep as the soul itself. With My father's word,**" he said pointing at the sword, "**You'll defeat Dranus. Gabriel, I am pleased with you and I love you.**"

The words had pierced the heart of the hare. No one, not even Gideon, had told him that; and for the first time he believed that someone actually loved him. It was something he needed to hear, and it brought him to bury his head into his Creator's shoulder and cried. Outside, the group saw the sudden appearance of light.

"Should we go in," said Samson.

"I see why not," replied Gideon.

Despite their eagerness to aid Gabriel, he was already emerging from the mountain with blade in hand. The fowls gathered around to get a look at this gorgeous weapon.

"See, exactly as I told you."

Suddenly the sword began to shimmy and shake. Gabriel grabbed it with both hands, but it was impossible to control.

"Hey, what's going on!" cried Gideon.

"I—I don't know!" shouted Gabriel.

The sword exploded, engulfing the birds in a sphere of light. Being blinded, no one saw what was happening, but once the sword returned to its prior state. Gabriel looked over all the fowls before him.

"His word not only will defeat the Dranus, but has dispelled the curse from all of you."

The birds looked at one another, and the cry of excitement; the cacophony of praise could have been heard for miles to come.

"Look at you Tion," said Ruffletin, "That bold white head, the brown feathers commanding greatness, your talons of might, your---"

"Thanks, Ruffletin, I got the gist of it."

The leader walked over to Gabriel.

"You were right. Whoever spoke to you, Gabriel, has knowledge beyond Dranus. If He says we can go against the bats, then surely the victory is sure. What do we have to fear?"

"Nothing," said Gabriel, "Nothing at all."



Over the next few hours, everyone was discussing how to attack the bats. Ruffletin suggested a stealth attack at night, but many of the birds were enjoying the sun and many hoped that the moon would not rise again. Tion suggested rallying other creatures to help them, but Gideon doubted that anyone else would help and it would take weeks to find someone willing enough to help them. Then a mouse bird hopped forward and said that they should gather as many birds as possible, attacking as a team. This was the best and most noble idea, and of course, they all agreed upon it.

The birds returned to the mountain and told the news to the others. There was much talking, everyone wanted to have a word. Tion assured them that it was the right thing to do. Hagabel, of course, had a different point of view.

"The right thing to do?— of all the nonsense!" she said. "Lives are at stake. Many of us have young ones. Are you going to send them off into the fangs of the bats too? Are their lives worth it, Tion?"

"They won't have a life living in this mountain," replied the eagle, "If they can fly they must come with us. Every bird must fight."

"By whose word?" said a voice in the background.

"By God's!" Gideon said with curtness.

Hagabel walked up to Gideon, looked him over with the utmost of disgust, and gave him her back. Gideon had the notion of tearing out her feathers, but he knew that such a deed would not have helped the situation.

"This is stupidity, Tion, and frankly I think you've been our leader long enough. I say we find a new leader a better one who will look after our best interest."

"Oh be quiet," replied Astra, "Are you blind, look at us! We are changed and God has done it. He'll help us."

"SHUT UP!" screamed the fat hen, "I've had enough of your beak! Everyone is so excited about God, well then, where is He? He's not here. I haven't been changed! Let him show up and give the orders, then maybe I'll consider this. I for one will not see the flock destroyed on the frivolous words of an outsider, and those who care about this flock will stay here. We have been safe all these years. No one can beat the bats or the unicorn- NO ONE!"

Suddenly, Tion pounced right in front of Hagabel, sending her straight on her bottom. Her eyes widened as the large bird towered over her.

"Now it is I who have had enough of your beak. We have been one flock. I will not have you cause a schism. We fly tomorrow. The birds that care for the livelihood of this flock will be outside in the morning. We have a battle to face, the cowards stay behind; the brave stand true."

All the birds looked at one another, none revealing the deep intricacy of their thoughts; none saying what they would do.

Chapter 18: Call to Arms

The birds rose again as the sun hung steadily in the sky, and when asked if the moon appeared again, they were assured that the sun never fell below the horizon. "It was always day", as Peppi described it, "and I hope it never goes away."

Tion, with Ruffletin and Astra, stood at the base of the mountain. Gideon and the others had come with them also. The party waited for a few minutes for the rest of the flock, but it was evident that the birds of Brunehaven did not share in their leader's enthusiasm. No other birds were present.

"Looks like you three are the only ones who showed up," said Gideon, "Sorry, Tion."

The eagle said nothing as he looked up the mountain. An expression of disappointment came over him.

"Don't worry about those cowards," replied Peppi, "With Gabriel and that sword the bats won't stand a chance."

"I'm hoping your right, little friend," said the snowy owl.

Suddenly up in the sky came a sound that everyone wanted to hear. To their surprise twenty-five birds landed near Tion, with wings spread and heads lowered. A hawk, named Korros, stepped forward to speak on behalf of the group.

"Forgive our delay. We have come to aid you in the battle. We are here to follow you whether we live or die. Every bird here pledges their service to you. You have led us all these years, Tion, we will not turn on you now."

The eagle nodded with appreciation.

"Where are the others?" asked Gabriel.

"Not coming I'm afraid," said Astra. "Hagabel has much persuasion over the flock---it makes me sick. Sometimes I just want to—"

"Let's leave Hagabel out of this," said Tion, cutting him short.

The eagle flew up onto a boulder, giving the presence of a great orator overlooking a crowd and made a quaint speech.

"Today marks a historic occasion for land walker and flyer alike. The world of night, being abolished, has given us a new beginning. The bats are strong, but we birds have our own tricks in a fight. The day is our advantage- let us take it. I thank you all for your courage and sacrifice, may none fall from the sky. Let us fly true and valiantly. Birds of Brunehaven take flight!"

A burst of bird calls erupted, but Gideon was waving his hand to get Tion's attention.

"Calm yourself, my warriors," said the eagle, "the rabbit wishes to speak."

Gideon came forward stood by the boulder, cleared his voice, and spoke.

"In the past, and even today, I have always prayed for victory in battle. No war was won without the hand of the Holy One. I remember God in all things."

"I'm not fond of praying," replied the eagle, "Please, lead us."

Samson and Gabriel bowed their heads. Peppi, Ragel and the birds mimicked. Gideon asked for God's guidance:

"Our Lord, the Creator and Maker of everything, we come to you under this journey you have put us on to ask for your strength as we go to battle with the foe. We have no strength of our own that has not been given to us. Thank you for keeping us safe. Give us victory for Your glory. May it be all for You. Let it be done, Amen."

The Holy One heard Gideon's prayer, and granted favor for the battle at hand.

Confined to his lair, the unicorn was not seeing his situation favorable at all. He paced rapidly back and forward: the beast was nerved wrecked. Slavebourne and Gluttmore

stood aside watching the frantic movements of their master. After a minute or so, the wart hog leaned over to the cougar.

"You know what? I think something is bothering him," he said in a whisper.

"I can see that," Slavebourne said rolling his eyes, " He's afraid of something."

"AFRAID," said the unicorn in a nasty tone, "I'm afraid of nothing!"

His voice sent chills down the spines of his minions. Gluttmore cowardly stepped behind Slavebourne. The unicorn took a moment to look deeper into his lair where all the children stayed.

His time was at hand for defeat and he knew he had little time, and with a roar he shook the lair. There was no plan that could defeat God, Ivronel knew this well enough, but his pride and conceit would not bring him to this conclusion. With a sudden jerk, he returned his focus back on the wart hog and cougar.

"Fear?" replied Dranus with a nervous tone in his voice "There is nothing to fear, for I command the land, I command this world; and I will not let it go without a fight!"

In preparation for a futile defense, Dranus ordered Gluttmore and Slavebourne to head to a region in the world of night (now know as the world of day) where few creatures dared to tread. It was a thick wood that was the abode of treacherous spiders. Among the inhabitants of the world of night this wood was commonly known as the eight-legged trap: for if any oblivious creature dared to pass in, they never came out.

In time, the cougar and warthog stood outside looking over the forest.

"I hate spiders," said Gluttmore, inspecting the canopy of spider webs.

"For once I agree with you," replied the cougar, " Come on, lets get this over with."

Twisted trees large and small huddled over one another. Cobwebs dangled from branch to branch; some covering an entire tree completely. A spider sat idle on its web until one of its threads was disturbed and it quickly retreated to a safer place amount the silky maze. Slavebourne kept his eyes alert and his reaper ready. Gluttmore, in cowardice, walked closely behind his companion, and would frequently scolded for walking so closely. The deeper they went into the wood, the larger the spiders became: from the size of your hand to the girth of a large dog was the continuing sight.



In their goings, Slavebourne and Gluttmore did their best not to disturb any particular web; for neither knew if one spider would take the chance of delivering a fatal bite, but the cautious weaving through the web was an impossible task. With webbing so numerous, they were bound to trip some alarm and they did. Suddenly twenty fiddle back spiders sprung from within the silky labyrinth, and surrounded the two intruders, or delicacies by their notion. Other spiders great and small awaited the outcome, hoping to scavenge a piece of food afterwards. Slavebourne, seeing his reaper was useless, wasted no time in explaining the purpose of his arrival.

"We have come by Ivronel---Dranus if you prefer," he said choosing the second name with better results, " He summons you to service. Who is the leader here?"

One of the spiders, with its eight eyes, made a sweeping motion to look upward. The cougar, oblivious to the action, was startled when prompted by Gluttmore.

The cougar looked up ;and there, as large as a horse, was a gray tarantula. Its body was

large as any average horse, but its legs made him as big as a house. The hairs over his entire body were so long and shaggy that he could have been mistaken for a eight legged dog. His eight red eyes were focused on the two, but unknown to them, his sight was gone. Smaller spiders, that made their abode within his hairs, comprised an intricate system of webbing that aided this gargantuan with sight; for when a string of web was triggered he knew exactly the direction of the appointed prey.

It took sometime for Slavebourne to speak again; for being in the midst of a house sized spider would render any speechless. The tarantula finally spoke out of curiosity; the cougar gradually regained his courage.

"Why are you here," replied the large spider with eyes blazing.

Slavebourne reiterated the message.

"Tell him I will come in time, good-bye," stated the spider, turning away.

"He wants to see you, all of you, now!" shouted the cougar.

The tarantula whipped its huge body around with such speed and potency that it sent Gluttmore and Slavebourne to the ground in terror. Taking advantage of their plight; the beast lunged, bearing his eyes inches from their faces.

"Please don't eat us," stuttered Gluttmore, "Mercy--mercy!"

"Your plea means nothing to me," replied the tarantula, "We will come to him. Now if you two don't get out of here, I will have my friends tear you asunder."

That was enough for the warthog and cougar. Out they ran without looking back, and the large tarantula, if he had lips, would have produced a large smile.

Chapter 19: The Great Sky Battle

Back at the mountainside, decisions were made of what to do next.

"Since we don't have the support we had yesterday," replied Tion, " attacking Dranus's lair will be harder than before."

"Right," came the snowy owl conclusively, " twenty-five against hundreds of bats is no match at all. We'll be pummeled, demolished, obliterated."

"We get the point," said Astra, "Any suggestions then?"

"The best way, I think, is a quick drop off near the opening," said Tion, "five birds will carry our friends behind the flock. I'll lead the others into battle. Once their inside the lair, we can keep the bats at bay."

Immediately five birds were chosen: Shilon the golden eagle would carry Ragel, Ruffletin would carry Peppi, Astra would be Gideon's carrier, Alenstred the Albatross would carry Samson; and despite the attempts of the bald eagle to dissuade Gabriel from riding in the front rank, Tion was to carry the black hare.

Northward was the direction given to Gabriel and the birds flew that way. The air was crisp as the birds of Brunehaven proceeded to the lair. Shilon, Alenstred, Ruffletin, and Astra flew in the rear of the formation. Gabriel and Tion were among the first rank.

During the flight Gabriel would glance at this sword given to him. He didn't know how he would use it. He mused over the possibilities until Tion interrupted him.

"So what are you going to call it?"

"Huh, oh the sword? Technically its not mine. I don't think Glory would like it very much

if I gave it a name.“

The formation flew on steady, coming closer to the castle. An osprey, who flew slightly ahead of the formation, returned to his leader. They were twenty miles from the lair.

"Are you ready Gabriel?," said Tion, "We shall be in sight soon."

"As much as I can be," he said nervously.

In the deep of the opening, a slew of bats filled the crags and gaps of the rocky walls; each cringing from whatever sunlight could trickle downward. None of them knew what to call his new form of illumination, but all agreed that it was strange and overwhelmingly awkward to be in. A bat, to his dismay, was sent to scout the skies. Sampling the air with his nostrils, the creature received the result he was in search of. Suddenly he returned to his leader.

"Birds!" he said, approaching Vamp " Not far. They have the advantage: the moon is gone and this new light will give them victory."

" Silence," said Vamp, accosting his subordinate, " Rash speaking may be overheard by our Master. Ah, this light— I hate it," he said shielding his eyes with his wing.

"They are close sir," said the bat returning to the subject, " no more than eight or nine miles away."

"Closer than that," Vamp said smelling the air, "They travel fast, which tells me they are few in number— the fools! Tion must have lost the confidence of some of his flock." With a turn, Vamp rallied his legion from within the crags. He command them all to kill their targets, to be relentless in the kill, and above all to be quick to destroy the five travelers.

"What of the spiders, sir?" asked one bat.

Vamp looked further downward into the lair.

"They have their own orders; we stay with ours."



In a torrent of wings, the bats took to the skies. One, then two, and then hundreds emerged from the mouth of chasm. Within minutes the birds of Brunehaven saw the legion. It was like seeing a dark cloud of smoke drawing closer to them. Hearts were racing; and nerves were on end. The battle was at hand. For a moment, it was silent. Gabriel no longer could hear the air passing around him or the potent flapping of the birds' wings. It was horrible for Gabriel during that event: this was his first major battle and he wasn't sure if it would be his last. A few comforting words from Gideon would have helped, but everyone was focused on the dark mass before them. Nonetheless, the meeting with Glory, renewed his strength, and he found the courage to raise the sword. It was slow motion for the black hare as the birds and bats, in hatred and strife, drew nearer still. Then, in the twinkle of an eye, the sound and speed returned; the battle was born. Upon Gideon's first view, the myriad of bats had devoured the birds instantly, but this was not to be. The birds were doing just fine against their attackers; most were performing spectacular acrobatic moves: diving at great speeds, turning with precision, and striking indiscriminately with their talons were just a few maneuvers the birds employed. Bats crashed into one another, fell from the sky in a dizzy swoon, or met their

doom by the talon or beak.

Gabriel momentarily lost sight of his friends through the carnage, but later he saw Astra and Gideon in a struggle against an attacker. Astra's elite flying provided some defense against the bats, but with every turn there was another bat assailing the falcon, ready to send her and Gideon to the ground below. One bat blazed across Gideon's back with such proximity that he could feel the breath of the beast as he passed by. Suddenly from behind, Astra's right wing was clamped into the mouth of one of the flying brutes. The enemy forced the falcon to turn sideways, sending Gideon from her back into the open abyss. His cries were heard and Gabriel gave command to save him.

"Tion, quickly!"

The bald eagle flew through the onslaught of feathers and fur, keeping sights on the falling hare. With a sudden jolt Gideon found himself safe again, but only for the moment.

"We've got company!"

In a furious flight, Vamp came after Tion, knocking birds out of the sky as he did. The bald eagle took a dive towards the ground. Gabriel and Gideon were hanging on for dear life. Vamp overcame Tion and lunged unto his back, sending both into a downward spiral. Gideon and Gabriel bounced in between the two flyers trying to stay abroad. Gideon took a swipe at Vamp's belly and made the cut sure, but the bat's grip on the eagle was relentless. In an act of desperation a pure skill, Tion preformed a barrel roll, breaking Vamp's grip temporarily. The rabbits were tossed outward into the open air with little time between them and the ground. Tion taking his left foot. Took hold of Vamp's throat, sunk his talon's deep inside, flung the bat towards the earth, and managed to catch both rabbits in mid air. Before meeting with the others, the three took a brief rest at the mouth of the lair.

Now with everyone present, all were wondering of how to gain entrance into the dark abyss. The voice of Glory came to Gabriel, and said,

"Throw the sword into the chasm."



Gabriel did so. As the sword fell, it spread over the entire opening, creating a protective layer of light for the five to slide down. Gabriel intimated for the others to come over, and all began to descend as if carefully guided from the dangerous pikes and gagged edges of the chasm wall. Safely below, the sword returned to its original shape into Gabriel's hand. "I have to get me one of those," said Peppi."

It was dark to the point of blindness in the lair; the voice of Glory spoke to Gabriel again saying,

"Strike the sword on the ground, and you will see all."

Gabriel did so. The dark lair was illuminated and in an instant the next enemy was revealed.

"Spiders!" said Peppi. "And here they come!"

The spiders made a direct onslaught against the five. All took weapons in hand. Gabriel didn't know what to do, but the voice; that was very soft yet poignant, gave him word.

"Tell your friends to draw near to you. When I tell you, take your sword and drive it

into the ground.” Gabriel wasted no time telling the others to come to him. The five were huddled together. The spiders came in range to kill.

"Ready," said the Voice, **"Now!"**

The hare, with all his strength, drove the sword into the earth. The sword shattered into a million particles of light. The light was like bullets flying into the air, ricocheting off the ground, and the spiders themselves. With every touch the light from the sword turned the spiders living, fleshy bodies into empty, hollow shells. Once every spider was vanquished, the Voice returned.

“Extend your hand.”

Gabriel did so.

In a flash all the particles returned to form the sword again, it was as if nothing had happened at all. The myriad of spiders were suspended as if stone, and with a gale of wind they all became nothing but ashes.

Chapter 20: Rage of the Reaper

The five stood together for a moment, still trying to take in the extravagant feat that had just taken place. Each touched the sword.

"Its almost as if its living," said Gideon

Despite all the attention, Gabriel reminded them of their intended purpose. As they crept in further, the rock formation depicted a gapping mouth full of teeth. The five also took precaution of any other traps that may be set for them; however, there were no physical traps, but one that could not be seen: fear. Ragel and Peppi had become the slave over such an emotion, lagging behind the three. Both were beginning to question if going inside was the smartest thing to do. Ragel remembered that Ananias said nothing about going to face Dranus and as far as he was concerned, aiding the three to this point was good enough for him..

"You three look like you can take it from here," replied the chow chow reluctantly, "Peppi and I will wait out here, right Peppi? We bid you a safe return."

"You may have a point, friend." said Peppi overlooking the cavern wall.

"Hold on," said Samson, You both gave an oath to see us through to the end."

"Those are Shavronite children, not ours." said Ragel.

"They're children in danger," remonstrated Gideon, "that should be enough for you to finish this journey."

"Don't bother with them, Gideon," said Gabriel. "let the cowards run home. We don't need them."

"We're no cowards," said Peppi accosting the hare, " watch your words!"

"Sure you are. You two are giving up just when you're needed the most— that's cowardly."

Regal pulled his axe, but it did little to change Gabriel's mind.

Ragel's capricious act was ample proof that Gabriel was doing the very thing the dogs needed. They were cowering, no doubt about that, and the black hare was telling the truth to their faces. The chow chow marched up to the black hare, with the intent of assailing him for the remark, but Peppi jumped in front of Ragel with arms outstretch.

"Don't touch him, Ragel, he right."

"Right about what?" Ragel said yelling, "No one calls us cowards, especially after what we've gone through."

"Maybe we weren't acting cowardly before, but now we are. It doesn't matter if those kids are ours or not. Ananias gave us names of honor; for he knew we would represent the colony to the end."

"There just names, Peppi!" said Ragel.

"Then let us live up to them."

Ragel let out a deep and discomfoting sigh. He looked deeper into the lair, then at the two hares and Samson.

"You and your mouth, Peppi," said Ragel making a fist, "you and your mouth."

The papillon gave a big smile, knowing that Ragel's fist was a way of expressing his defeat in the argument."

"My mouth has once again saved the day." said the little dog happily.

In a triumphant march, the five continued to press on. Gideon was first and descried a figure up ahead. The strange figure cracked a smile and disappeared behind one of the towering stalagmites.

"Everyone keep you guard up, we've got a visitor."

No one dared to mover further. There was dead silence; nothing stirred for minutes until a voice, ringing from above, addressed them.

"So you are the party that has called all the ruckus."

The cougar stood proud and tall on top of a stalagmite. His wicked grin and embrace of his reaper gave the impression that he was ready to carry out his master wishes to destroy all of them.

"And who might you be?" asked Gideon.

"There's no point telling you; you won't be alive long enough to care."

Everyone took up arms quickly. Slavebourne jumped down coming after Gideon first. Reaper and sword went to battle, with Gideon holding his own, as both used the rocky terrain to their advantage. The white hare went in to deal a fatal blow, but the cougar jumped out of sight, hiding among the rocks.

"Where is he?" said Samson."

"I don't know," said Gideon, "I almost had—"

"Gideon, look out!"



Suddenly from his left came the cougar's reaper aimed squarely at his neck. Dodging the blow, Gideon fell back. The cougar raised his instrument for the deathblow, but in turn received a blow himself from Samson. The jab sent the cougar stumbling, but it wasn't a complete knockout, and again the cougar took refuge behind the rocks to change his plan of action.

"We need to change our battle plan," said Samson, "You and Gabriel head forward. I, Ragel, and Peppi will handle this cougar."

Peppi emerged as a decoy.

"Hey, sissy!" shouted the little dog, "That reaper looks a little heavy for you, come out

and let Peppi show you how to use it.”

It wasn't a moment after Peppi's taunt, that Slavebourne emerged. Samson and Ragel came to aid the little dog, as all four creatures battled: blows were given and received. In a final effort to render the cougar senseless, Peppi bit Slavebourne's hand sending the reaper to the ground, Ragel came with a right hook, sending the animal staggering. The final blow belong to Samson. His left hook sent Slavebourne into one of the stalagmites with such force that it broke.

“Think I hit him too hard?” said Samson

“I don't care,” said Peppi, “as long as he is out cold.”

The cougar laid inert on the ground as the three waited silently in the cavern.

Chapter 21: A Moment Of Sorrow

There was only a small gap in the cavern wall to proceed further. Gideon and Gabriel slipped in and emerged safely on the other side. This part of the lair consisted nothing more than a large concave basin where droplets of water collected. The exit was on the other side; crossing through the water was inevitable, and so was the fight at hand.

Gluttmore emerged from the darkness looking on with a whimsical smirk, and slowly descending into the stagnant pool. Gabriel and Gideon, without speaking, proceeded to draw closer to the wart hog.

“Take the left side,” said Gideon, “I'll take him from the right.”

Gluttmore awaited the first move. Gideon came first; each blow landed squarely upon the boar's large tusk. Gluttmore lunged at Gideon; but upon seeing the black beginning to advance, he immediately changed his course of action, swing his head at the hare.

Gabriel took a side blow from Gluttmore's upper body. The young hare came down into the water with a great splash, shaken and blinded momentarily. The sight of his inert companion, gave Gideon the assumption the Gabriel had been killed; and all the fury that a rabbit could muster, Gideon sprinted the enemy before him.

Running towards the boar was a fatal mistake for Gideon--he knew better, but anger blinded his better judgment. Gluttmore positioned himself accordingly, lowering his tusk, and when Gideon came, he raised his head, driving his tusk into Gideon's side.

At that exact moment, Gabriel had returned from his stupor, and saw the blow that mortally wounded Gideon. The white hare landed a few feet from Gluttmore, who was inclined to trample the poor rabbit for spite. Gabriel cried out, which drove boar toward Gabriel.

“Take my sword,” said the voice of Glory to Gabriel, **“and hold it as if it was an arrow. Take hold of the air as if it was a bow, and let the sword fly.”**

Gabriel did so. The sight of this sent Gluttmore into a hoarse laughter, but when the sword was released, there the laughter ceased and wart hog fell dead. This victory was not celebrated, and could not have been. The faint voice a Gideon called out to Gabriel, who hastily drew to the white hare to the other side of the basin.

“Come on, Gideon” Gabriel said crying, “stay with me!”

“Let me sleep,” he said cracking a smile, “I should have been more patient.”

With every second, Gideon became weaker.

“No, not now.” said Gabriel, “The sword—the sword will help, just like it did with the

birds.”

Gabriel shook the sword, but nothing happened. Again Gabriel shook it in frustration, trying desperately to bring about some miracle. Gideon took hold of Gabriel arm, the touch seemed to appease whatever fears he had.

“Stop, you can’t make God do anything He doesn’t want to do. Here, take my crest.”

The young hare was reluctant; but after another command from Gideon, he took it.

Gideon lifted his trembling hand to Gabriel’s forehead.

“Remember the God that worked on my heart to take you in; that put love in my heart to love you as my own son; the God who loved you before you cared about him, and the God who works before you now. Don’t be discourage because of me. Honor Him in all your ways, seek him without restraint.”

There was more that Gideon wanted to say, but the trauma of the wound abated Gideon’s strength. The hare laid quiet and still with Gabriel’s weeping face upon his teacher’s bosom. Among the mourning came a voice that was quiet as a whisper, but poignant in Gabriel’s soul.

“Why are you weeping?”

Gabriel raised his head slowly. Kneeling with him was Glory. His face although fixed upon Gabriel, shed a tear for the Gideon and Glory cried as well.

“Do you believe me?” said Glory; for he knew Gabriel was beginning to doubt everything.

“Gideon dead.” the hare said tearing up, “Why didn’t you make the sword work?”

“Gabriel, I’ll take care of him. “Go on.”

“I CAN’T!” shouted Gabriel, “I’m afraid---I don’t understand everything---you made a mistake in choosing me.”

“ Will you allow this tragedy to separate you from Me? Do you believe that I can make good out of anything---even this?”

Gabriel was silent, but then he spoke.

“I---I believe,” he said faintly.

“Then go.”

The black hare glanced at the opening leading to the final encounter, he looked back and found that Gideon and Glory were gone. He stood in the water for a few moments took up the sword and marched toward the final battle.

Chapter 22: Dranus

The dragon waited silently, contriving a wicked scheme to prevent God’s triumph. When Gabriel appeared, Dranus did not acknowledge him, but the sword he held in his hand terrified him. The presence of it forced the beast to lower his head slightly. Gabriel looked over the multitude of children still sleeping. Dranus planted himself strategically at the back. The dragon had three deadly attacks that could render any creature defeated under his power. Gabriel was nothing to him, however, with God’s sword in his hand, the

hare was a true warrior and Dranus needed to destroy him or suffer defeat himself. His first attack he chose was *doubt* and unleashed it upon the black hare.

“Why are you here?” said Dranus coolly, “Why have you interrupted my peace?”

“I---I’m here to bring these children back to my world.”

“Now who told you to do that?” said Dranus.

“God did.” said Gabriel.

“God?” was the unicorn inquiring response. “Did God really speak to you? You were sick with that poison in your veins; it put you in a trance and made you out pass out, didn’t it?”

Gabriel stood quiet shaken that such information was available to this creature.

“I was fine,” said Gabriel taking heart. “I woke up.”

“Yes---in a dream. Can you truly trust a dream?”

“Well---I---”

“Dreams are strange and cannot be trusted,” said Dranus, “You were hallucinating. God did not speak.”

Gabriel was fighting his thoughts and Dranus knew he was about to give up, but the Sword of God flashed and the hare was in that open field again where he meet Glory. It was real, not a dream, he remembered how he was healed, he remember the joy of being next to Glory. God reminded him of all these things. The sword flashed again and Gabriel was back. There was new strength and he used what God had given him.

“Dream or not, I know that God spoke to me.” Gabriel said boldly, “I was healed by him and given this sword and everything Glory told me is true---nothing will change that!—NOTHING!”

Dranus rolled his eyes. His first attack although powerful was now nothing more than an futile instrument. However, he had even a more deadly attack: *hatred of God*. Dranus quickly changed the subject as Gabriel advanced forward.

“Where is your teacher? I thought there were two of you?” said the unicorn in a caring tone, “Has something happened to him?”

Gabriel stopped in his tracks. The death of Gideon was still fresh in his mind---it was very painful. Dranus took advantage of this apace.

“God didn’t help him did He?” said Dranus sympathetically, “He shows the power of the sword and when its needed the most---to save a loved one---God so unkindly lets him die. How can you love Him? You know he could have saved your teaching instantly! Yet, God chose to let him suffer---to let him die!”

Gabriel started to cry and Dranus continued the verbal abuse to his pleasure.

“God is all powerful, is he not?”

“Y--yes.” said Gabriel weakly.

“So why is Gideon dead?” said Dranus arching his wings, “He should have given him life right there!”

“No--no---stop!” shouted Gabriel shaking his head.

“All this time telling you that you’re a king and you have purpose. I know who you are, Gabriel,” said Dranus winning the fight, “All you are is a worthless orphan who lies, steals, and hates God---that’s what you are Gabriel, accept it!”

After the tirade, it was silent in the lair. The sword in Gabriel hand was beginning to slip

from his grip. Dranus watched happily. The thoughts of his past life filled his mind and Gabriel was unable to fight back, but just before the sword fell from his hand another hand took hold of his. Gabriel looked up, forgetting everything that he suffered under Dranus. Glory arrived dispelling the scene again.

“Hold that sword. Don’t let go. It’s the only weapon you have.”

Gabriel got a grip and took courage.

“He too great for me,” said Gabriel, “I can’t stand against him.”

“He’s not too great for Me. Remember what I told you: I will make you a king and I will teach you how to live in righteousness. Take the sword and cut that dragon--- deliver the children.”

In a blink of an eye, Glory was gone and the lair had returned. Gabriel was renewed in strength and marched stoutly towards Dranus. The unicorn, very surprised by the turn of events sought to try another trick, but saw that it would not work at this time. Dranus rose to his feet.

“Fool you have such a heart to battle with me, but can you fight the little ones?” he said smirk, “Rise children and attack!”

Suddenly all the slumbering bodies of the young sprung up at Dranus’s command. They took hold of Gabriel pulling and biting and spiting at him. He was being over taken.

“Does God have an answer for this?” said Dranus mocking.

Gabriel fell to his knees from the pain struggling just to breath. Finally with all desperation he cried out,

“Glory---help me!”



The sword flashed with a great brightness that blinded all occupants in the lair. When the flash was gone, Dranus looked in disbelief: all the children had disappeared. Gabriel slowly rose to his feet, and brushed himself off---the grand battle was about to begin. A deep fury in Dranus bubbled inside of him and started to transform. A dragon appeared before Gabriel’s eyes, and the hare was shaken from what he saw, but did not run. A ball of black fire flew from lips of the dragon. Gabriel swung the sword sending the fiery ball to the side as it made a hole in the liar’s wall. A brief stare-down ensued between them. Dranus spun in a circle whipping his long tail across the ground. Gabriel jumped and ran forward bring the blade down on Dranus’s left hand. The cut was like a spreading infection and Dranus drew back with a yelp. He licked his hand, giving the black a hare a unconcerned look. He had underestimated Gabriel’s boldness and God’s presence in him. It was time for the unicorn to hold nothing back---and so he did!

The dragon jumped towards Gabriel and the hare swung like before, but found that the beast was too fast for the blow. He tried again and Dranus darted out of the way with such speed that he moved in a blur. All around the lair Dranus moved and as he did he would torment the hare by striking him with one of claws by pricking him. Gabriel fell and so did the sword.

“Rise up, O king!” said Dranus ending the attack, “Rise up and strike me if you can.”

The hare tried crawling over to the sword, but a swift kick from Dranus sent Gabriel across the ground.

“You won’t be needing that.” said the dragon walking towards the hare. “It’s a shame that God will not fight for his own so-called King of Shavron. He lets me torment you, Gabriel, that is why you are suffering. If it wasn’t for Him you won’t be hurting right now. I can make this all go away.” replied Dranus continuing his approach. “I am ruler over this world and I can give you anything— all I need from you is to quit this nonsense. Let there be peace between us.”

Gabriel laid on his side unable to move from the pain. Dranus words seemed true: what if he could end this? What if he could be at peace? The children were already saved there was no point in going on with this battle, but just a Gabriel was about to submit to the dragon’s temptation, a quiet voice came to his mind to aid him. It reminded the hare that Dranus was a liar and he that he says is a lie. Without the sword, Gabriel seemed helpless, but Glory revealed to him a another weapon: prayer. So right there Gabriel closed his eyes and prayed----the dragon stopped suddenly.

“What are you doing?” said the dragon.

Gabriel ignored him and continued to pray to God for strength.

“Listen to what I have said,” replied Dranus stomping the ground, “Stop this!”

The young hare paid him no mind; and holding out his hand, the sword came and God’s strength came upon Gabriel and he arose fresh to fight. Dranus nearly toppled from the sudden change, but did not hesitate to attack. Gabriel was emboldened by the Lord and when Dranus tried to prick him again, Gabriel blocked every attempt with the sword. The spirit of God moved over Gabriel. Gabriel moved with such speed that Dranus was on the defense. Gabriel would appear in front of him and then sudden to his left and again to his right--he was everywhere! During the melee, Gabriel sliced part of Dranus’s horn. It fell to the ground, only to enrage the beast even further. When Dranus came in to bite him, Gabriel sliced the beast’s face sending Dranus hard against the wall. The young hare did not give him time to recovery; and with a charge, he planted the sword into the beast’s shoulder. Dranus roared in agony as he materialized into a dark mist, fleeing the cavern in complete fear. The battle was over.

Chapter 23: Repentance

Gabriel picked up the sword and began to return to the where he started. He meet Samson, Peppi, and Regal. When asked about Gideon he only said,

“God has him. That’s all I know right now.”

Slavebourne, guarded by Samson, inquired of Dranus.

“Your master has fled,” said Gabriel,

“Then let me flee with him,” said Slavebourne.

Samson took the reaper and the cougar ventured deeper into the lair calling his master’s name. He also left his silver horn. Gabriel retrieved it .

At the foot of the liar the sword extended its rays and in an instant they were all outside among the Birds of Brunehaven. When Gabriel saw Gideon’s body he ran over to his fallen teacher. He clung to Gideon and cried begging God to give him life again.

Suddenly a cool and refreshing gale came over the open plain. It brought a heavy cloud

that rolled over the land and it engulfed them all. Gabriel could not see anything save his dead teacher. The cloud continued to pass over him as he held on to Gideon. Walking towards him was Glory.

“Give him life, again.” was Gabriel’s crying plea, “I don’t want him to die. He taught me; he cared about me.”

Glory knew that Gabriel loved Gideon and did not deny his request. Glory knelt down took one of Gideon’s ears and spoke into it.

"Time to wake up, time to rise, Get up my friend and open your eyes."

Upon those most divine words, the white hare, which was clearly dead, slowly opened his eyes, yawned, and began to look around. He glanced up at the redeemer of his life, and could not contain the tears of worship.

“I praise You.” said Gideon.

“As do I,” replied Gabriel.

“When you return to Tribless Hill wait for the Shavronites there. I have already spoke to Samson. The Shavronites are on there way.”

Glory touched both of them on their foreheads and bless them.

The wind increased and blew the cloud from Gideon and Gabriel. They were standing on Tribless Hill looking over the children laid inert on the plain. Gideon and Gabriel went through the inert bodies.

“There not dead.” said Gideon, “Just in a state of slumber.”

“Can’t wake them up though, what going on?”

Suddenly Samson, Deborah, and Tiber. Ulice and the Shavronites walking behind him. The moment the children were seen the Shavronites ran forward each looking for their child crying a wailing greatly. Ulice found his sons and tired desperately to wake them.

“TIP, TOP, WAKE UP---ITS YOUR DAD! PLEASE WAKE UP!”

None of the children responded. Ulice shoot a murderous glare with tears in his eyes at the judges.

“Hold long will you torture us?” the skunk said sobbing, “I love my sons! What have you told God to prevent Him from giving my children back to me?”

“I have said nothing,” was Samson reply, “Does not this scene remind of something Ulice? The open grave of all the young ones burnt in sacrifice to that wicked idol I showed you before. As you cry for your children---as all of you cry!” said Samson addressing the multitude, “God wept for every child slew on that altar.”

The Shavronites for the first time in a long time stopped to consider their ways. Their hearts were distant from the Holy One to the point of indifference. Even Ulice was pricked at the heart. He looked down at his sons and then back at Samson.

“Samson,” he said barely getting out the words, “Will God hear me? Please tell me if he will?”

“He hears you now.”

“The sin is mine.” said Ulice, “My sons don’t deserve this---I should die for my callous way. I did not stop the burnings when I could have. God forgive me---take my life, but

not my sons!”

All the Shavronites there mourned in repentance. Deborah planted her face in her hands sobbing greatly. Tiber, Gideon, and Gabriel wept as well.

“O Holy One,” said Samson, “hear the hearts of repentance now. Give the Shavronites their children again. You are the God that judges and you are the God that has mercy. Show it to us now that generations after may know that you are real and true.”

The Lord heard. Suddenly, there was a child calling for his mother; another calling for her father. All the children clung to the parents for joy. Ulice’s sons hugged their father and Ulice held tight to them. It was a great night--a joyful night! Festivals were held for days honoring God for his discipline and his love. The practices of Iya were abolished and her moon idol was destroyed. Years later Gabriel became that king. God lead him and that hare followed the Holy One in all His ways. As long as Gabriel was king, the Shavronites did not stray away from God. The Night’s Journey is end.