

DANIEL AND
THE TRIUNE
QUEST

By Nathan Lumbatis

Sample Chapters

Chapter 1: Math Versus Spring Break

Ben ran back and forth in front of the soccer goal, waving his arms up and down.

Daniel wasn't sure whether he was trying to signal his team for help, fly, or dance around like a black-haired, blue-eyed chicken with ADHD.

Daniel raced to the head of the pack, advancing toward Ben as he dribbled the soccer ball away from an attacker.

It was a perfect day. The sun was bright, and the air was warm with a slight breeze. His friends were crowded around the goal, watching as he was about to score (if Ben's chicken dance was any indicator). Best of all, Daniel had no homework, which was awesome because the bell was about to ring to signal the end of the day and the beginning of spring break.

He squinted his dark-brown eyes and glanced to the right, catching his reflection as he raced past the windows lining the small, stucco schoolhouse.

The P.E. field ran the entire length of the school. There was one large window for each classroom, so Daniel got a pretty good look at himself when he cut the ball behind his body and dribbled it around another player. When he scissored the ball away from the next kid so fast the poor guy fell flat on his face – that looked pretty cool too.

A grove of poplar trees encircled the school grounds, stretching from the entrance all the way down around the athletic fields behind the school and back up toward the road. Daniel imagined they were clapping their leaves in applause, urging him on to victory.

“I’m coming for you, Ben. No mercy!”

Ben froze mid-chicken strut and locked eyes with Daniel. “Bring it!”

Daniel charged the ball to kick it to Ben’s left. As Ben dove to defend, Daniel paused, hopped to the side, and gently kicked the ball. Before Ben could recover, it rolled slowly through the center of the goal as if it were also about to be on vacation.

The bell rang, and everyone behind the goal cheered, or laughed, before rushing back inside to get their things.

Daniel sauntered up and offered Ben a hand. “Good game, man.”

“For you, you mean. My team was basically walking the last half.”

“You did pick a kid on crutches to be one of your defenders. I’m not sure that helped.”

Ben brushed grass off his shorts and followed Daniel toward two double doors at the side of the school. “Ryan really wanted to play, and his doctor said he needs to exercise more so his ankle can get stronger.” He cleared his throat and said in a quieter voice, “And I thought the crutches would make people less likely to steal the ball,

which was obviously wrong. Don't you have any compassion?"

"Compassion?" Daniel shoved his way through a sea of students surging out of the building. Inside were the middle school lockers and what appeared to be the entire student body mobbing the corridor like a herd of frenzied cattle. "Let me remind you that he tried to trip me with his crutches. Twisted ankle or not, that kid had it coming."

Ben shrugged and kneeled to open his locker. Daniel's was farther down the hallway with the eighth-grade lockers.

"Meet you at the bikes?" Daniel asked.

Ben finished his combination before responding. "Actually, I have to meet with Mrs. Jackelberry." He said the name as if it were made of rotten eggs. "I bombed my last math test, and I have to take it home to be signed by Mom and Dad. They'll probably make me"—he swallowed hard—"study."

"Over spring break?" Daniel grimaced. "They won't make me study too, will they?"

"Why would they?" Ben finished stuffing books into his backpack. "The lowest grade you made this year was a B. They'll probably make you tutor me though. I'll see you at home."

At a head taller than most of the other students, Daniel watched over the crowd as Ben elbowed his way down the hallway.

After getting knocked into the wall a couple of times, Ben finally made it to one of the seventh-grade classrooms with colorful, laminated numbers covering the open door. He made a disgusted face and shuffled inside.

Daniel turned on his heel, groaning audibly as he inched toward the eighth-grade hallway. Tutoring? He was hoping to avoid anything that looked like school the entire week, but he knew Ben was probably right. The Joneses were strict with grades, and they wouldn't hesitate to make Daniel help him study, spring break or not, especially since he was so good at math. He wasn't sure how that happened. He certainly didn't study or anything crazy like that.

Daniel reached his locker and pushed sweaty, brown hair out of his eyes before fumbling with the combination. Once it was open, a pile of books and loose-leaf papers tumbled out. He haphazardly stuffed them back in with one hand while grabbing his backpack and lunch box with the other. With half a second to spare before it all fell out again, he slammed the locker shut and headed toward the door. If his parents could see what his locker looked like. . . He shuddered. What a lecture he'd get! Grades weren't the only thing they were strict about.

Daniel reflected on his time with the Joneses since they began the adoption process. When he had lived at the Holy Moses Home for Bleeding Heart Orphans, there were rules, of course, but they were more like suggestions. If he didn't get his chores done on time, or if he went to

bed later than normal, it wasn't a big deal. There were just too many kids for Ms. Julie to worry about.

Daniel shoved his way through the hallway toward the double doors.

The Joneses were a completely different story. Chores were to be done by 5:00 in the evening. TV was limited to one hour a day. Bedtime was 9:00 on school nights, and 10:00 on the weekends.

But worst of all were the consequences. No TV if he had bad grades? Doubled chores the next day if he didn't finish his on time? Loss of his iPad if he stayed up too late? It had been nearly eight months since the custody hearing, and he was only just getting used to their parenting.

It's not like he didn't love them. Living with them had been one of the best things that had ever happened to him, and for once in his life, he was happy. So happy, in fact, Daniel wondered if he would want to live with his biological parents if they actually showed up. Though, what chance was there of that? His entire life, they had never so much as sent a postcard. But the Joneses—they were exactly the opposite. They had fought for him, provided for him, loved him.

Daniel finally squirmed his way through the mob crowding the doors and jogged toward his bike. Ben's was parked next to his, as usual. He tilted it aside to pull his own bike away and felt the scratches and dents on the frame, made when Ben had tried to help him during the

fight with Gator Gurge, his monstrous ex-sister. It seemed like an eternity ago.

He hopped on his bike and pedaled away from the school.

First, Ben and Raylin had helped him escape from the Gorges. Then, they'd been transported to Machu Picchu where he'd been adopted by the Father—the God of the entire universe—and granted a fragment of the Sun Sword as his inheritance. Of course, that wasn't all there was to it. He'd had to find the remaining shards of the sword while being chased by hordes of demons, possessed people called Creeps, and the ultimate baddie—Supai. Soupy. The Enemy. Whatever. To top it all off, Raylin betrayed them all. Daniel would never forget the feeling of anger and hurt that welled up inside him, or the confusion (and relief) he felt when she decided to help them instead.

All that had changed him. He felt like a completely different person than the Daniel who had grown up in the orphanage. That Daniel had been so angry, so alone; he would never have forgiven Raylin. But now, once he'd been forgiven and filled with the Father's love, it was hard not to forgive her.

He smiled to himself. And to think he wouldn't have even taken up the quest if the Sun Sword hadn't been necessary to save Gabriela.

Daniel felt his cheeks grow warm as he pictured her long dark hair, olive skin, and beautiful eyes.

In the distance, the road stretched up the hill that would take him to the overpass. He was almost to the entrance of his neighborhood.

Daniel stood up from his bike seat so he could pump the pedals harder.

What was Gabriela up to now? Probably off helping the Father or Granny on some Earth-saving errand. It was just his luck. He finally meets a girl who likes him, and she disappears. Literally.

Daniel checked himself. She never told you she liked you. She probably never realized you were interested.

Maybe he would see her again when the Father's call came – the sign that he and Ben were to set off in search of the Triune Shield. He could tell her then.

He felt a flutter of excitement.

Maybe. But he had no idea when that was going to be. The past year hadn't exactly been filled with answers to his questions. And his prayers to the Father just weren't the same as when he was on the quest. Sure, he still felt the Father's presence, especially when he was practicing with the Sun Sword. Occasionally he would "hear" a reply to his prayers. It was just that, the Father seemed more distant now. And the blessing? Granny had said he still had it, but if he did, he couldn't tell. No flaming body here.

Daniel was breathing hard by the time he reached the crest of the hill.

"Daniel! Wait up!"

Daniel recognized Ben's voice over the roar of the traffic on the interstate below. Ben was about halfway up the hill, so Daniel hopped off his bike and leaned against the railing until he caught up.

"Wow, Ben. You made it all the way up without stopping this time. You're getting stronger. How was The Jackelberry?"

Ben jumped off his bike and flashed Daniel an irritated look. "She was in a surprisingly good mood. Only threatened to fail me once. I guess even teachers look forward to spring break. And this is the third time I've made it up the hill without stopping, thank you very much."

Daniel shrugged and started walking his bike toward their neighborhood. "So, what are our plans for the week? Staying up all night playing video games? Camping out in the woods? Eating candy until we pass out? And if you say anything about school, I'm going to throw you over the bridge. Even if Mom and Dad make us study together, I plan on pretending that part of the day doesn't exist."

"Camping sounds fun," Ben replied as he walked his bike up next to Daniel's. His tone was a mixture of distraction and breathlessness. "Of course, that's only if Janice lets us. She'll probably make us look at her sock collection. She knits them herself, you know."

They cleared the overpass and turned into the entrance to Sweetbay Bottom.

Daniel groaned. “Ugh. They go off on a week-long trip to the Caribbean, and we get stuck with a sitter. Good grief. I’m fourteen! And you’re like, what? Ten years old now?”

“Twelve, nerd. Almost thirteen.”

“Wow. Touchy. Either way, we could take care of ourselves. If we can face down Soupy, I think we can handle a week of relaxation at home without a nanny. Especially one who knits her own footwear.”

Ben snorted. “Faced down Soupy, or ran away screaming like girls? And it’s not like Mom and Dad know what happened in Peru, anyway. If they did, they’d probably put us on lockdown for sure. But it’s no good trying to talk them out of it now anyway. Janice is driving up early tomorrow morning before Mom and Dad leave.”

“Is she really that bad?” Daniel asked, climbing back on his bike.

Ben did the same. “You’ve heard of a stick in the mud? Janice is the whole tree. And I’m sure Mom and Dad will tell us we have to obey her every word.”

Several kids were biking or skating up and down the sidewalks in front of their homes, so Ben and Daniel stayed to the road. They slowed at the stop sign before their street and coasted to the right.

Daniel could see their red brick house from here. It was hard to miss it since it was the last and biggest house on the block before the wooded lots. Its sprawling front porch, two large dormers, and big windows made it look

homey and inviting against the lush backdrop of trees. It was the perfect home. Certainly better than anything Daniel thought he'd ever get to live in. Definitely better than the Gurges'. Daniel craned his neck around and just barely made out Barth Gurge's house down the street. He wondered if Gator was back home or still living with her hippopotamus aunt, Barf.

Daniel chuckled. If she'd been allowed to return, she'd surely have tried to beat him up by now. He made a mental note to check out her profile on Instagram to see what she was up to and turned back to the road.

Mr. Jones was pushing the mower back into the garage. Apparently, he had just finished mowing the yard because there were grass clippings on the street in front of their house.

As they pulled up, Mrs. Jones poked her head out of an upstairs window. "The boys are home, but make sure you blow off the back patio before you get distracted."

"Will do." Mr. Jones grinned up at his wife. "Now get back to work, woman. Those bags won't pack themselves."

Mrs. Jones snorted. "'Woman?'" Keep talking like that, and I really will pack your bags." She pulled herself back into the window, but the rest of her reply was still audible. "And send you back to your mother's."

Daniel didn't know why, exactly, but the way his mom and dad joked with each other made him feel happy.

It was as if their love were strong enough for sarcastic, witty comments, and that gave him a sense of safety.

He and Ben coasted their bikes into the garage behind their dad, who was rifling through his toolbox.

“Hello, boys,” Mr. Jones said. He didn’t turn around, but Daniel could tell he was smiling by the way he spoke. He finished fitting something into what looked like a small, black box, then turned around, keeping the object behind him.

Ben didn’t seem to notice. “Uh, Dad? Remember that math test I was studying for last week?”

Mr. Jones’s smile faded. “Yes. And?”

“Funny thing is, I didn’t do too well on it, and Mrs. Jackelberry” – Daniel swore Ben looked like he almost choked on the name – “needs your signature.”

Mr. Jones set the object back into the open toolbox drawer and held out his hand. “All right. Let’s see it.”

While Ben unzipped his book bag, Mr. Jones raised an eyebrow at Daniel. “Don’t tell me you have bad news too.”

“Nope,” Daniel said, patting his backpack. “Good grades, no homework, and no studying. I’m school free for the week.” Then he muttered, “I hope.”

Ben finally handed the test to his dad. It was covered in red Xs and exclamation points, and Mrs. Jackelberry had basically written an essay about Ben’s math skills (or lack of them) all over the back.

Daniel smirked. "I think I see what you did wrong, Ben. You're supposed to answer the questions, not bleed on them."

Ben elbowed him in the ribs.

Mr. Jones handed it back. "You know your mother and I will want you to study during your break."

Ben dropped his hands to his side and stared at the garage ceiling. "Dad!"

Daniel held his breath.

"And Daniel?"

"Hmm?"

"I need you to help him."

Daniel tried to muster a smile that would make him seem like an obedient and submissive teenager, one that would never deserve the inhumane punishment of homework over a school holiday. "Yes, sir. But don't you think it would do me . . . uh, us good to take a break from school. Maybe Ben has Post Mathematics Stress Disorder. It's best not to push him."

Ben gave a sickly cough. "I'm pretty sure that's a real disorder, Dad. Didn't I see that on the news last night?"

Daniel gave him a concerned look and patted him on the back.

Mr. Jones snickered. "Nice try, but no. Ben, I expect you to study at least an hour each day. Daniel, I want you to be right there with him. And don't forget Janice is going to check in with us daily. She'll let us know what you've been up to."

Daniel gripped his backpack strap. He felt like throwing it in the garbage can in front of him. "Thanks a lot, Ben," he grumbled.

"Oh, pardon me! I'll make sure to pass next time so you aren't inconvenienced. How rude of me."

While Ben was talking, Mr. Jones had fished the object out of the toolbox. He held it out in his hand, and Daniel realized it wasn't one, but two black boxes.

"I've gotten you both something," Mr. Jones said. He handed one to Ben and the other to Daniel.

Daniel lifted the lid off his and found a small pocketknife inside. The handle was made of deer antler with something engraved on the side. Daniel peered closer.

Daniel Jones

The Best Son A Father Could Ask For

Daniel glanced at Ben's. Except for his name, it was identical.

Mr. Jones put his hands on both boys' shoulders. "I know it's nothing too special, but this is the first time we're leaving you both. I wanted it to be like a rite of passage. You know, you're both the men of the house while we're gone. Protect the home. Stay out of trouble. Be responsible. That sort of thing."

"Cool," Daniel said. "Thanks."

Ben eyed Daniel's, then went back to studying his. "Yeah, thanks Dad." He stuffed his in his pocket and walked around his dad toward the door.

Mr. Jones brushed off his hands and smiled. "Now, who wants to play a little soccer before your mom makes me finish my chores?"

Daniel unslung his backpack off his shoulder and slid it toward the door. "Awesome! We get the ball first."

"Ben? You coming?" Mr. Jones said, walking toward the front yard.

Ben opened the door. "I've had enough soccer today. No thanks."

"Suit yourself. Come on Daniel. First one to three points wins."

He jogged into the sunshine, and Daniel followed.

Behind him, Daniel heard the door click shut and Ben's faint footsteps as he climbed the stairs to his room.

Chapter 2: Boom Goes the Sun Sword

Daniel hopped out of bed the following morning just after sunrise. He was a staunch believer that getting up before noon on the weekends was a horribly evil concept invented by the Enemy. But Janice was to arrive around 1:00 so the Joneses could leave for the airport. Daniel had no idea just how strict she was going to be, or whether she would allow him and Ben out of the house at all. He pictured himself suspended in the living room by a spider's web of yarn while Janice prattled on and on about socks.

The horror.

If he was going to get in any practice with the Sun Sword over the break, he'd better do it now.

Daniel put on his clothes and quietly walked toward the bedroom door.

"What's happening?" Ben's muffled, tired voice drifted out of a cave of blankets and pillows piled on his bed. He and Daniel had been sharing a room since custody was transferred to the Joneses. A hand appeared and pointed to the window. "It's barely light out, and you're awake. Is it the end of the world?"

"I'm just going into the woods for a bit. Tell Mom and Dad I'll be back soon if they notice I'm gone."

“You’re assuming I’ll be awake to tell them. Good night.” There was a reshuffling of blankets, and the hand disappeared.

Daniel smirked. He wasn’t sure why Ben had gotten so upset the day before, but he was glad he was back to cracking jokes. Maybe he was just ticked off because of his math grade.

He picked up his shoes and tiptoed past his parents’ room, down the stairs, and out the front door.

The morning was chilly and gray with a light mist. The sun shone brightly through the fog, though, and would probably burn it away soon. Another perfect day.

Daniel took a deep breath before heading toward the woods and Granny’s ivy-covered house. As usual, the windows were dark, and there was no flash of the bright-blue nightgown she’d worn during each of their encounters the year before. Which was totally weird. If he could appear as a person made of blazing fire, he was pretty sure he wouldn’t opt for the Little-Old-Lady look.

He left the little house behind and moved into the forest toward Pedestal Hill. Ben had named it that since it was easier than “That-Hill-With-The-Transportation-Pedestal-Inside-It.”

As far as Daniel knew, Granny hadn’t been to the neighborhood since she and Gabriela disappeared. He and Ben knocked on her door several times over the past months, but there was never an answer.

The back of his neck prickled, and he shivered.

He occasionally got the feeling he was being watched whenever he passed through the woods here. He scanned the area. Nothing but big, old trees, and a well-worn path leading off to the gully. It was the one he, Ben, and Raylin had fled through when chased by Creeps the year before, and it was the perfect place to practice.

Daniel waited until he was in the deepest part, where the walls rose at least ten feet on either side. There, he was sure no one walking through the woods would catch sight of the glowing sword from a distance. The fallen trees and broken sticks were perfect targets and made the place ideal for swordplay.

Daniel stretched his arms and legs and did a few warm-up exercises he remembered from karate. Since inheriting the blade, he'd lost interest in going to actual karate classes. Sword practice was way more fun. Besides, who would want to wrestle a nasty demon to the ground and punch it in the face when you could just exorcise it from a safe, and sanitary, distance?

He took a deep breath and pictured the Sun Sword in his mind. Fire spun out of Daniel's chest and down his right arm. The long, wavy blade burst into the air at his fingertips. The entire sword was about four feet long and had the deep orange and yellow glow of live embers. The hilt, long enough for two hands, was a complicated braid of metal, although Daniel didn't need to grip it to use the sword. It just floated beyond his reach, following every move he made with his arm. A sun was engraved in the

center of the guard, which flared out from the etching like two wavy rays of light.

His eyes ran along the blade. The once razor sharp tip was gone, as though it had been sliced clean off. Daniel still didn't know what happened to it. One minute he was confronting Raylin about her betrayal in the Enemy's throne room. The next, a powerful blast surged out of the sword, and the tip was gone. Since returning, he figured Granny or the Father would explain what happened.

No such luck.

He spun to his left, imagining that a tree branch was an enemy sword. With one sweep, the branch was cut in half.

Before the stick hit the ground, he extended his arm behind him, skewering an invisible foe. Daniel imagined it was a Creep, freed in one blinding strike from the darkness within him.

He leaped over his fallen enemy, counting the seconds before the unconscious man would have disappeared, rescued by the Father, and swung the sword through the root ball of a fallen tree. It sliced clean off, splattering the gully wall with a spray of dirt and rotten wood. His momentum carried him around in a full circle, catching an imaginary Nightstalker head-on before it could strike.

At the end of the gully, rushing rain water from the last storm had dumped huge clumps of clay and rock into

a bowl-shaped arena. There, Daniel pictured the Devourer skulking behind an earthen barrier.

He hopped onto a tree that had fallen against the rocks and raced up the trunk. The Devourer realized his predicament too late as Daniel jumped into the air above him, the Sun Sword raised above his head. Before he hit the ground, Daniel focused on filling the blade with all his power for a Fire Strike, just as he'd done in Wayna Picchu. With a dull thud, the blade sank into the dirt floor. A blast of white-hot fire radiated out from the sword and dissipated four feet from the gully walls.

Daniel straightened, keeping his eyes fixed on the spot. He wrenched the sword out of the ground and walked toward it. Once there, he made a mark in the dirt with his foot.

Since returning to the States, he'd been practicing this move to build up his strength. In Peru, it had left him momentarily drained, but vaporized enemies within a fifty-foot radius at least. Now, he could do the move several times in a row without collapsing, but it was much less powerful.

Twelve feet. Fifteen at the most. That won't buy much time if I'm surrounded. He wiped sweat off his brow and walked back to the epicenter of the strike. He'd have to do better before their next quest. Who knew what sort of monsters they'd face?

He steadied his breathing and began again. A Creep in front felled with a flick of the blade.

A bat-demon skewered in the air, its spirit sent swirling back to the Enemy.

Snake demons with hungry eyes and glinting spears. Parry. Thrust. Block. Slide under their defenses. Slash. Done.

Scorpion demons with earth-shattering maces. Raise sword. Focus power. Crash!

The wave radiated outward, stopping directly above the mark in the sand. Daniel growled in frustration and immediately struck the ground a third time. Fourth. Fifth. Sixth.

He collapsed, watching the last wave of fire fall short of the mark entirely.

Not good enough! What if Ben needs your help? What if Gabriela is captured again?

If Gabriela were captured again, he'd do anything to save her, even sacrifice himself. He felt a flush of shame even though he was alone. She sacrificed herself by attacking the Nightstalker even though she knew she couldn't win the fight. But it had been enough. With the monster distracted, he, Ben, and Raylin had escaped to Cuzco.

He stood up, his muscles aching from the strain, and glared at the line in the sand. He wasn't going to let that happen again.

"Not good enough!" he shouted and swung the Sun Sword down as though cleaving through his failure to protect his friends.

The sword made a vertical arc of fire that flew, end over end, until it exploded into the gully wall. The noise it made was like muted thunder—vibrating the air with such power that Daniel was blown onto his back amid clay shrapnel.

He gasped for breath and slowly turned his head, wide-eyed, to stare at the sword. Uh, Father? What just happened?

Several minutes passed, but there was no explanation. He sat up. His whole body felt empty and spent—peaceful, relaxed, but spent.

Daniel's head finally cleared, and he pushed himself to his feet. A crater the size of his room had been blasted into the gully wall.

He stared down at the sword, waving it back and forth. It looked normal: wavy blade, effervescent fire, missing tip. Nothing had changed. But that technique was certainly different. Until now, the sword was mostly useful against spiritual enemies and hand-to-hand weapons. If he could master this new move, he'd be ready for anything the Enemy could throw at him.

But how had he done it?

He spread his stance, focused on sending all his strength into the sword, and slashed the air, bracing himself for the explosion.

Nothing happened. Maybe he hadn't tried hard enough.

He tensed all his muscles, swung the Sun Sword a few times to get momentum, then cut the air vertically.

No arc of fire. No explosion.

Daniel examined the blade, though he knew there was nothing wrong with it. It was him. Maybe he just wasn't strong enough.

Perfect. I can't blast anything more than a few feet away, then I discover an awesome new move and can't pull it off more than once.

His cell phone beeped. Daniel growled. It was probably time for him to go back. He pulled the iPhone out of his back pocket and opened up the message from his dad.

Breakfast. Home.

Daniel replied with the obligatory K and stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

He raised the Sun Sword above his head. Maybe he was thinking too hard about it. If he just let his mind relax, it would come.

Daniel closed his eyes. Father, help me get this!

He waited until his heartbeat slowed down, took a deep breath, and cleaved the air. Daniel opened one eye. There was no arc of destructive power, but there was a terrified butterfly wildly flapping about in front of him.

"Well at least there's that," Daniel said bitterly as he let the Sun Sword return to his body.

He turned to leave the gully, weaving his way through the labyrinth of trees and boulders. Maybe during

tomorrow's practice, he would be able to create another arc of fire. He needed to figure out the new ability before the Father called on them to begin the next quest, which would probably be during the summer like last time. At least he had a few months to work on it.

He came to the mouth of the gully and broke into a slow jog. Within a couple of minutes, Granny's house came into view. With fewer trees to block it, the breeze was stronger here. A gust rattled the ivy growing up the walls of the shack and blew into an opened window in the back of the house. The raggedy curtains hanging against the windowsill blew inward, revealing the darkened interior of the house and a silhouette.

Daniel kept running. It was probably just an old piece of furniture casting its shadow against the wall. If Granny were back, she would have been sweeping the streets with her broom.

He finally reached the road. There were woods on both sides of the street, and as he turned toward his house, he could just make out the top of the dormers.

He sped up and reached his front yard just in time to see Ben riding his bike up the road past the Gurges' house.

"Ben! I'm home!" Daniel shouted after him.

Ben kept pedaling and eventually turned down the next street.

Must not have heard me, Daniel thought. But then his stomach growled, and all thoughts other than breakfast disappeared.

He bound up the front porch stairs and went inside. His parents were bustling around in the kitchen. Mr. Jones was cooking bacon in one skillet and eggs in another, while Mrs. Jones was (for some strange reason) organizing the refrigerator.

She glanced up as Daniel walked in. "Oh good, you're back. Come here for a minute. I've put all the leftovers here in these containers. And I've labeled them so Janice knows what they are. And . . ."

Once she mentioned leftovers, Daniel lost focus. He kept nodding his head as if listening, but couldn't take his mind off the bacon sizzling in the pan next to him. Using so many Fire Strikes and—whatever the other new technique would be called—had made him hungrier than he thought.

". . . and that way Janice won't have to bother going to the store," his mom finished saying.

"Hungry?" His dad piled what had to be six scrambled eggs onto a plate and tossed three strips of bacon on top of them.

"Dying," Daniel replied and grabbed the plate and a fork. He plopped down at the kitchen table and shoveled the food into his mouth. "Sow wood Ben gofflufufuf?"

"Stop talking with your mouth full!" Mrs. Jones snapped, and ran to get a wet rag to wipe up the food Daniel had spit onto the floor.

He gulped down some milk. "Sorry. Where'd Ben go?"

“He went to see Jeff,” his dad replied. He put the last of the bacon onto the skillet. “I think he texted Ben this morning to see if he could play video games.”

Daniel took another bite. “Why—”

A glare from his mother silenced him until he had swallowed his food.

“Why didn’t he wait on me? I would’ve gone with him.”

Mr. Jones shrugged and leaned against the counter. “Not sure. But, you know, your mom and I were wondering if you’ve noticed him acting strange lately. Is something wrong?”

Daniel thought back. The only thing he knew that was bothering Ben was having math homework. Maybe he could turn this conversation to his benefit. “Wow, I don’t know,” he said in as innocent a tone as he could muster. “I mean, he was pretty bummed about having to study over the break. Do you think he’s depressed about it?”

Mrs. Jones made a sad face at her husband. “Oh, Alan. Depressed? Maybe we’re pushing him too hard with school.” She threw the dishrag into the sink and sat down next to Daniel. “What did Ben say? Is he mad at us? Was he crying? My poor baby!”

Daniel stared at his mom and slowly finished chewing the food in his mouth. He couldn’t believe how sensitive she was when it came to him and Ben. She was all jokes and sarcasm with their dad, but mush when it

came to her darling boys. Unless, of course, he was spitting food all over the kitchen floor.

“I don’t think he’s mad, but . . . um, he was definitely upset about his grades. Stressed, even. A good break from school would do him good, don’t you think?”

Mr. Jones joined them at the table. “Honey, if you’re going to believe everything our boys say, especially when it comes to school and homework, you’ve already lost the war.”

He folded his hands and leveled his gaze at Daniel. “Whatever it is that’s bothering Ben, I don’t think it’s his homework. But I’ll tell you what. Since it’s so important to you that you get a complete break from school, and it’s obvious Ben’s not quite himself, I’ll make a deal with you. You talk to Ben and find out what’s wrong, and you both can take half the week off of studying. Whichever half you want is your choice.”

Daniel grinned. “Deal. And while we’re bargaining. Do we really need Janice to babysit us? How about Ben and I clean our room in exchange for staying home by ourselves?”

Mr. Jones burst out laughing. “How about this for a deal: Janice comes today as planned, and you have to clean your room anyway or else the homework goes back to the way it was?”

Daniel knew his dad’s tone meant there would be no further discussion. He jumped up from his seat and

cleared his plate. "I was just kidding. Your deal sounds good too." He ran up the stairs.

"Daniel?" Mrs. Jones called after him. "Once you're done straightening things up, could you go talk to Ben for me? I'd like to know what's going on before we leave. And I want you guys home by 10:00."

Chapter 3: Cloudy with a Chance of Certain Death

Daniel cleaned his room and was out the door within the hour. Staying on task was worth it when he considered the alternative: a slow and agonizing death by schoolwork.

He was sore from his morning routine and opted to walk to Jeff's house to work out his stiffness.

By this time, the fog had burned off, and the day was looking sunny. A set of chimes rang in the wind, drawing Daniel's attention to the Gorges' front porch as he passed by. Apparently, since losing custody of Gator, Barth had tried his best to fix up the house. Maybe it was part of the stipulations Child and Family Services had put in place for Gator to return.

The siding on the house had been repainted, and the lawn was maintained. There were even a few flower beds Barth had planted near the road. And . . . lawn ornaments? Daniel knelt down at the ones nearest the sidewalk. A hideously fat statue of a gnome-father puckered his lips at a gnome-baby in his arms. He stood on a plaster base engraved with the words Smoochies Forever. Daniel stuck out his tongue. Smoochies plus Barth did NOT equal a pleasant thought.

To its right was a naked cherub poised as though in mid-flight. A sash draped over its shoulders read, Love Lives Here. Yeah, right, if love were made of baboon hair and body odor.

Daniel stood up and scanned the yard. Unicorns? Check. Fairies? Check. Stones engraved with random inspirational words like Hope, Believe, and Endless Possibilities? Check. Check. Check.

It looked as though a flea-market had thrown up in the yard. Daniel kept walking. At least Barth was trying. As miserable as being in the Gurge family had been (even if it had only been less than 24 hours), he hoped Gator could eventually come back to her dad.

The front door burst open, and Barth darted into the yard so fast his toupee flew off onto the statue of a woman imploring the heavens for help. It wasn't her lucky day.

"You leave those alone! I know what you're after. Trying to steal my chances of getting Gator back, huh? Haven't you done enough damage?" He must have just gotten out of bed because he had pajama shorts on . . . and only pajama shorts.

Red hair. Red hair everywhere.

Daniel almost summoned the Sun Sword instinctively, but instead broke into a dead run. "I wasn't touching anything! I promise. Just please go back inside!"

"You can't stand in the way of justice. You see this?" Barth ripped up the gnome and held it over his head.

“Smoochies, Daniel! Smoochies! They’ll see that I’m a good father, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me!”

“Congratulations!” Daniel shouted over his shoulder, then thankfully turned down Jeff’s street and left the scene behind. He shivered. He was going to have to do some serious mental purging to get rid of those images.

Jeff’s house was the third on the left. The houses here looked all the same: one story, brick, built before Daniel was born, boring. They did have one interesting thing about them, though. A drainage ditch, which he, Ben, and Jeff often used for practicing bike tricks, ran behind the houses and up toward a small parcel of oak trees that separated the neighborhood from the interstate. If Janice didn’t turn out to be too strict, maybe he and Ben could ride down there later.

Daniel reached the front door and gave it a knock but didn’t wait for an answer before walking in. Jeff’s mother was usually at work on Saturday mornings anyway, and he doubted Ben and Jeff would hear him knocking when they were playing video games.

He found them in Jeff’s dark room, faces glued to the TV. They were in the middle of a particularly explosive round of Halo, and Ben wasn’t doing too well.

“Quit trying to run me over!” Ben’s character zigzagged frantically across the lower half of the screen while Jeff steered his hovercraft after him.

Jeff laughed maniacally and leaned closer to the screen. His blond hair stuck up in every direction, and his

blue eyes were bloodshot. He'd clearly just rolled out of bed.

Daniel snuck in silently and dropped down next to Ben. "Hey guys!"

Ben jumped and dropped the controller.

Splat.

His character's lifeless body lay prostrate on the ground while the hovercraft coasted off his half of the screen.

Jeff broke out into an obnoxious giggle that sounded like a goat was being tickled. "6-0, Doofus! You're on a roll. Hey, Daniel."

Ben elbowed Daniel. "Thanks a lot. Ninja much?" He pushed a button, and his character reappeared.

"Every chance I get. Why didn't you wait for me before coming up here?" He turned to Jeff. "Mind if I jump in on a round?"

Without taking his eyes off the screen, Jeff stuck his hand into a basket of videogame paraphernalia and fished out a controller. He tossed it to Daniel.

"Thanks." Daniel pushed a button, and the screen split into three-player mode. He leaned toward Ben. "Oh, and Mom and Dad think you're acting weird or something. They're worried and want me to figure out what's wrong with you."

Ben was silent, his character frozen on the screen.

Daniel put him in his sights and sniped him. "Ha! You never stood a chance. Anyway, get this. If I do find out

what's wrong with you, then we get to take half the week off from studying! Buzz back in so I can kill you again."

Ben dropped his controller and stood up. "Maybe I wanted to play with Jeff by myself. Something wrong with that? And if my parents are worried about me, why didn't they just talk to me themselves?"

Daniel paused the game.

Jeff sighed in disgust and fell backward on his bed. "Come on! You can't pause it in the middle of a fight. Keep playing. Talk later."

Daniel ignored him and looked up at Ben. "I don't know why they didn't ask you. But who cares? Just go fill them in on whatever's got your panties in a wad so we can get out of studying. Don't make a big deal over it."

"Guys. Play!" Jeff was obviously going through withdrawal.

Ben nodded his head. "Right. Well, I just wanted to spend some time with Jeff by myself. It's not a big deal. Who cares?"

"Push start. Push start. Push start." Jeff was now rolling on the floor, tangled up in his bed sheets.

Daniel stood. "Jeff! Quit whining. Ben, what's your problem? Are you honestly upset about me following you here?"

"Don't start yelling at Jeff," Ben shot back. "What's your problem?"

Daniel took a step back. "What? I don't . . . I don't even know what to say to that."

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t say anything because —”

The Sun Sword burst into the air between them and hovered, pointing toward the open door and pulling Daniel in that direction.

He hadn’t been expecting it and almost face-planted into the door post.

Ben stared at him. “What, are you going to exorcise me? Put that thing away!” he hissed.

“I didn’t summon it! At least I don’t think I did.” Daniel frantically tried to relax, but the Sun Sword wouldn’t return to his body. “It won’t respond.”

As one, they turned to Jeff, whose bloodshot eyes were now glued to the blade. “What . . . is . . . that?”

Ben laughed nervously. “Oh this? It’s nothing. Just a . . . a thing. I don’t know why Daniel is using it right now. But there it is.”

“Right, Ben,” Daniel said. He grabbed onto the door frame to keep from falling over. “It’s a thing. Good explanation. But, uh, maybe since I can’t control it, we should go.”

Jeff jumped out of his bed and approached the Sun Sword. “How are you making it float? Where did you get it?”

Daniel released his grip and followed the pull of the sword into the hallway. Ben followed close behind.

“Cool, isn’t it?” Daniel said. “It’s not a real sword, see? It’s an illusion created by . . .”

“. . . his belt buckle,” Ben finished, trying to block Jeff’s view of the sword.

The sword pulled Daniel into the living room. Jeff followed their every move.

“Yes, my belt buckle. Because that makes a world of sense. It’s like a hologram. But we don’t know where you can get one because . . .”

Ben clapped his hands. “That’s right, because it was a gift. A gift for his . . .”

Daniel’s mind raced. What was the next holiday? “Easter . . . for my Easter . . .”

“. . . party!” Ben finished. “His Easter party! Of course that’s what it was. Has Easter already come this year?”

Daniel forced a nonchalant laugh. “It was an early party. Who hasn’t had an early Easter party at least once in their life?”

The back door was in sight, and the sword shifted to point directly at it. Daniel elbowed Ben and jabbed his thumb in that direction.

“I’ve never gotten an Easter party,” Jeff said, still following. “Can I play with the sword?” He reached out to touch it.

“No!” Ben and Daniel shouted in unison. Jeff took a step back in surprise, giving Ben just enough time to fling open the door so Daniel could bolt through it.

The Sun Sword angled itself to point down toward the drainage ditch, which was on the other side of a privacy fence in Jeff’s backyard.

“Bye, Jeff,” Daniel said as he and Ben climbed over it. “You probably shouldn’t mention anything about the sword to anyone though. They’re really rare, and no one would believe that you saw it. Uh, bye!” The last glimpse Daniel got of Jeff was him standing in the doorway, blinking in the sunlight, mouth hanging open with a string of drool repelling off his bottom lip. After everything that had happened in the last year of his life, Daniel knew how he felt.

The ditch was mostly grass, but small shrubs and scrubby-looking trees sprouted here and there along the bank. Most of the houses bordering the ditch had privacy fences in their backyard, except the house to the left of Jeff’s.

The Sun Sword obviously wanted them down in the ditch, but once they hit the bottom, it pointed toward the bunch of oak trees at the end of the street.

Daniel dug in his heels so he could take a moment to examine the sword. He waved his arm around and tried to make it return to his body again, but the sword wouldn’t respond. It wouldn’t even follow his hand. Was it broken? It looked the same as it had earlier. Maybe this was a side-effect of the new technique he’d discovered.

“What’s wrong with it?” Ben asked, sliding down the embankment next to him.

“I don’t know. It’s like it’s being controlled by someone else. You think this could be a sign from the Father?”

Ben brushed off his pants. "How should I know? You're the expert."

"I wouldn't say that. But something strange did happen this morning." Daniel quickly filled him in on the practice session in the gully.

"Okay, so your sword has new powers, but now you can't control it. How useful."

"Something like that. In any case, I guess we should –
"

Daniel was interrupted by a familiar hissing, wheezing sound coming from the street. He glanced at Ben, and they quietly followed the ditch until they could see around the corner of Jeff's fence. One glance was all they needed.

Creeps. Two of them. They obviously knew Daniel and Ben had been in Jeff's house because they were watching his front door. Daniel studied them for a moment. They were women, and both had black hair cascading halfway down their backs. Their clothes were strange-looking: baggy pants and loose-fitting shirts made of bright red and yellow cloth. One of them glanced toward the ditch.

Daniel dropped down so that his head was beneath the level of the bank and motioned for Ben to follow suit. The Sun Sword was tugging unusually hard now, so he had to grab hold of a nearby shrub to keep from being dragged away.

“What do we do?” Ben whispered. “Lure them back here and exorcise them? You can’t just leave them running around the neighborhood.”

Daniel considered this. “But the Sun Sword isn’t working. Or, at least, it won’t let me have control. Maybe we’re not supposed to fight them.”

The pull of the blade suddenly intensified, and Daniel lost his grip. If it hadn’t been for a rock catching his feet so that he shot up into a standing position, Daniel was sure he would have been dragged, feet first, all the way down the ditch.

Ben scurried along after him, keeping his head low. “Wow. We’re REALLY not supposed to fight them.”

“Apparently. Maybe their boss is too big to handle right now.” Daniel broke into a jog to keep up with the sword’s momentum.

Ben shivered. “If there’s any monster crazier than what we’ve already faced, then I’d rather not know about it.”

Daniel hated to admit it, but he felt the same way. Backing down from a fight was not in his nature, but if there was something lurking around the area that was worse than the demons he’d faced in Peru, he didn’t mind avoiding the fight.

“Whatever the reason, we don’t really have a choice at the—” The Sun Sword suddenly sped up and lifted Daniel off his feet. He wildly flung his arms around to get a handhold on anything, but only managed to grab Ben’s

shirt. It was little help. The pull of the sword was so strong, it lifted Ben into the air as well and plunged them both into the trees.

Everything happened so quickly neither had time to shout in surprise, and they silently tumbled into a heap on a soft pile of old oak leaves behind a screen of ferns.

The Sun Sword returned to Daniel's body, and he rolled onto his stomach. Ben was already prostrate, peering through the trees down the ditch.

Daniel groaned, but Ben clapped his hand over his mouth and pointed back toward Jeff's house. Through the ferns, Daniel could barely see the Creeps. They were sniffing around the edge of the ditch. One of them got excited and pointed in the direction of the trees. The other nodded and black vapor seeped out of her nose, snaked into the air, and flew off in the direction of Granny's woods.

Go to your parents and stay inside. Now.

Daniel sat up. He was surprised to hear the Father's voice so clearly. The urgency of the command was so forceful that he couldn't disobey.

"Ben. The Father wants us to go home. I think we're in danger if we stay here."

Ben went pale but nodded. "Okay. Lead the way." He got up to follow but then glanced back at the Creeps and froze. "Wait a minute. She stole my bike! What a, well, a Creep!"

Daniel peered through the brush and saw one of the Creeps riding Ben's bike up and down the sides of the ditch. "Even Creeps need a break sometimes. I guess." He summoned the Sun Sword. Hopefully, the lay of the land and the foliage would hide the blaze. The Creeps seemed distracted anyway.

Ben pulled at his hair. "Ah! She just wiped out. She's going to scratch it up—Oh man! Now she popped off the chain! What next, the tires? My tires!"

"Ben!" Daniel hissed. "Focus!"

The blade pointed to their right. That made sense. If they walked in that direction, they would quickly reach the entrance to the subdivision. From there, if the way was clear, they could hightail it home. Daniel released the sword and began quietly crawling through the underbrush.

From the ditch came the sound of a crash and dull thud. Ben's groan told him the Creep had wiped out again.

As quietly as they could, Daniel and Ben wove through the trees until the road leading into the subdivision came into view. After checking behind them to make sure the Creeps weren't in pursuit, they broke out into a run, hit the road, and sprinted toward their street.

"Any more warnings from the Father?" Ben asked. He scanned both sides of the road as if expecting Creeps to be lingering on people's front porches.

Amazingly, no one was out this morning. Maybe everyone could feel the Creeps' presence or something.

Now that Daniel thought about it, there was a sense of foreboding in the air.

“Nope. But his last message said to go home and stay inside. I bet he’ll send guidance soon.” Daniel reached the stop sign and slowed down to take the turn, but something caught his eye, and he froze.

Ben zoomed past him several yards before skidding to a halt. “What? What’s wrong?”

Daniel pointed toward the oak grove. A transparent, black sphere had encompassed the wood. It took him a moment before he realized what it was.

“That’s an Orb of Concealment.”

Ben scratched his head. “Like the thing the Nightstalker used so no one could see him attack us?”

“Yeah. Except we can see inside it for some reason. Maybe it’s because we’re Vessels?”

“Maybe. But what’s it doing there?”

He didn’t have to wait long for the answer. Inside the sphere, a dark, green cloud, crackling with thunder, formed over the trees. The interior glowed with a pale, sickly light, and its surface swirled with eddying whirlpools. It reminded Daniel of those soap and water tornado bottles he’d made in school, only this looked poisonous.

Ben dropped his arms to his side. “Oh.”

Once it had covered the entire wooded area, lightning burst out of the cloud, striking the ground again and again. Daniel stopped counting at ten. Anything in the

little wood would have been killed for sure, if not by the strikes then by the flames that were certain to come.

Daniel waited for the fire, but instead, all the trees and shrubs began withering. In a matter of seconds, they turned from vibrant spring green to deathly white.

The orb and the cloud suddenly vanished, and with the next gust of wind, all the leaves either disintegrated into ash or fell to the ground amid crumbling trunks.

Daniel got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. That had been meant for them. Whoever the Creeps had sent a message to had created that storm...or plague. Whichever it was. No wonder the Father's command had been so urgent. He doubted even the Sun Sword could have fought against that. Sure, it could absorb the attacks of the Pitwolf, but it had shot one bolt at a time, two at the most. He almost blacked out with just one of those strikes. There's no way he could have caught all the bolts from the cloud. Besides, those seemed different. Even at the stop sign, the air had turned acrid from the lightning. Daniel's eyes burned. He didn't want to find out what it was like to catch one of those on his sword.

"What are we supposed to do?" Ben's voice was barely a whisper. "Should we run to the pedestal? Is this the Father's call?"

Daniel turned. "No. But I'm sure it will come soon." He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. It made sense that the Father would give them some sort of guidance in light of the attack. Until then, they should

wait. Then again, the Father didn't always make sense. At least, not to Daniel. He shook his head. "Right now, the only thing I know we need to do is to get home. I think we'll be safe there."

Ben nodded. "The greatest protection from the Enemy is the love of a mother and father."

Inti had told them that months ago, right after he'd rescued them from the Nightstalker. Daniel hoped he'd meant literal protection.

"Let's go."

END OF SAMPLE

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