



THE GATES OF HEAVEN SERIES

# THE LAND OF DARKNESS

A FAIRY TALE BY  
C. S. LAKIN

### **Praise for *The Map Across Time*:**

“The novel is fast-paced and tightly plotted, which means that the reader will quickly be drawn into the complex twists and turns of the story and, in fairy tale tradition, led toward a surprising yet satisfying conclusion.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“*The Map Across Time* is a fairy tale in the classic sense of the term. As J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out, fairy stories serve to draw the reader into a mythical world that conveys the joy of the gospel. Lakin’s tale meets this noble task head-on. Her novel is not only interspersed with the Bible (including biblical Hebrew!), it is a retelling of the Bible’s overarching narrative. Not many Christian novels manage to blend great storytelling and scriptural truth—but here is a book that does!”

—**Bryan Litfin**, author of *The Sword* and *The Gift*

“[*The Map across Time* and *The Wolf of Tebron*] are set in a mythical world that is permeated with a sense of both good and evil—a world in which the leading protagonists are required to battle not only external forces that seem to be beyond their control, but also their own inner demons of fear, anxiety and self-doubt. The tales are most definitely coming-of-age novels, in which the well-rounded characters come increasingly into their own as they both literally and metaphorically navigate their way across a landscape that is lovingly, though at times fearfully, depicted.”

—**Lois Henderson**, Bookpleasures.com

### **Praise for *The Wolf of Tebron*:**

“The Gates of Heaven promises to be one of the best fantasy series to come along in quite some time. One of the signs of this potential is its ability to hook you into its world at page one and leave you saying, ‘just one more page’ or ‘just one more chapter.’ That has happened to me before with C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*,

J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence. Now C. S. Lakin has done the same with *The Gates of Heaven*."

—**Jonathon Svendsen**, *Narniafans.com*

"Much richer and deeper than traditional tales from fairy-land . . . what Lakin does so well with her fairy tale is to provide images which remind us of what God has done for us."

—**Mark Sommer**, *Examiner.com*

"*The Wolf of Tebron* is a grand, sweeping tale of one man's journey to the truth and to rescue his true love. This fanciful, whimsical, wild tale can truly inspire you to perseverance—highly recommended."

—**Grace Bridges**, *Splashdown Reviews*

"It's a thoroughly enjoyable adventure story, with exotic settings, unpredictable turns, a terrifying enemy, and unexpected humor. Lakin's work is stylistically beautiful. The exotic locales are vivid, from dark north to burning desert to misty jungle. I found myself looking forward to each leg of Joran's journey just so I could experience another part of her story world."

—**Rachel Starr Thomson**, *Little Dozen Press*

"This book is filled with beautiful literary allegory and symbolism. I enjoyed the fairy tale world C. S. Lakin created for her characters to navigate. I love how the story unfolded in the end and look forward to more in *The Gates of Heaven* series."

—**Jill Williamson**, author of *To Darkness Fled*

"Lakin has masterful control of the writing craft, developing her characters and drawing the reader to see the world through their eyes."

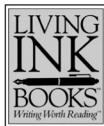
—**Phyllis Wheeler**, *The Christian Fantasy Review*



THE LAND  
OF  
DARKNESS



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C. S. LAKIN



## *The Land of Darkness*

Volume 3 in The Gates of Heaven® series

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# THE BRIDGE ACROSS FOREVER

*There's a bridge made of light  
That crosses between death and life  
Where shadows walk in the sun  
And desperate lovers run*

*One day a child and an angel  
Stood on either side  
Of a magic river  
That there was no crossing  
But as they tried  
The water began to rise  
Then they raised their eyes*

*And as the river fell away  
They built a bridge across forever  
Between tomorrow and today  
There is a bridge across forever*

*We will meet again someday  
On the bridge across forever  
I know that we will find our way  
To the bridge across forever  
Between tomorrow and today  
There is a bridge across forever*

*I know that we will find our way  
To the bridge across forever*

## PROLOGUE

THE TRAVELER wiped a hand across his weary eyes. He looked down at his dust-laden boots as his feet touched a much harder surface than the dirt path they had trodden upon for the last three days. Stooping, he brushed grit away from the path to reveal ochre stones beneath, and his mind puzzled at the pattern of cobbles spreading out before him. He raised his eyes, straining to define his surroundings in the last tint of twilight. A towering, crumbling edifice of the same ochre stone confronted him but provided no answers. He straightened, weary, achy, and confused.

As he stepped cautiously across what appeared to be an abandoned lane, the cool night breeze dried his damp hair and sent a shiver down his neck. But more than cold wind caused his knees to shake uncontrollably. Uneasiness had plagued him the moment he entered the shambles of what looked like a once-thriving village. He could make out the remains of finely crafted stonework: corniced walls of buildings, corrals for animals, even a nearly intact archway adorning the entrance to a land that must have once boasted a beautiful, wide avenue running the length of its commercial center. In the failing light, he ran his fingers along inlaid scrolling of ebony and oak, polished wood that wrapped doorways in designs of leaf and flower. A sudden breeze from the mountains in the north carried the scent of snow-covered pine forests, and

encircled him in a flurry that made him grasp his cloak and wrap it tightly around his neck.

The young man knew he was lost, for this place was not on any map. His jaw clenched in anxiety and his throat felt dry as road gravel; he had hoped to find warm shelter for the night, a hearty meal, and a soft goose-down mattress at an accommodating inn. Instead, he heard eerie, discomfiting sounds carried on the air, flitting around his ears. He stopped, every nerve heightened, and pressed his back against the wooden lintel of a rotted doorway that led to a field of tumbled stones and a tangle of weeds. He closed his eyes and sifted through the sounds, hoping for familiarity: crickets, nocturnal animals, even wolves, whose howling would at least remind him he was still in his world and not some strange aberrant one.

His heart pounded in expectation but was not consoled. A soft voice, high in pitch and achingly sad, drifted on the suffocating night air. His gut wrenched at the anguish underlying indecipherable words, which tugged at him and made his feet move of their own volition. Confused, he found himself running, his boots clacking against the uneven roadway beneath him.

He passed a broken, waterless fountain at the center of a paved square, saw shadows dart through darkened doorways. On a pedestal stood a robed figure carved from dark malachite rock, missing limbs, and parts of its face had been chipped away. A weak voice, deep within his mind, yelled at him to run, but both the words and the urgency fragmented before he could recognize them as his own.

His feet took him down one constricting lane after another. He lost track of time, of his exhaustion, of his fear. More voices, muddled and pressing, swelled around him like a tide, attacking and receding, entangling him like a carp in a fisher's net. Then he stopped abruptly.



Before him hung the remains of a wrought-iron gate that swung loosely from a wooden post. Beyond the gate the cobbled street ended, and perhaps the very world itself came to naught, for the young man trembled at the sight unfolding before him.

An impenetrable darkness, much darker than night, gathered around him, expectantly watching. Shadows like dreams skittered across the ground at his feet. He heard the rustle of branches and took a hesitant step, pushing aside the creaking gate. Wisps of pitch-blackness reached out to him, swirled around him, coaxing, urging. A child's voice startled him by calling his name. He thought he saw a flash of a tiny hand reaching out of the gloom, but the surge of blackness shifting and oozing before him quickly devoured it.

Now, his mind raced with a dozen warnings, but they came too late. For he was a stranger to this part of the world. He had never heard of the tales whispered in dark corners over mugs of ale, or told as harsh threats to badly behaved children. He had set out, as many do, to find his fortune. But now he would find only misfortune, for fate or carelessness or stupidity—it didn't matter which—had led him to the Land of Darkness.

Shepherds from the surrounding hills knew not to venture near the ruins of Antolae, the ancient name given to the once-thriving region. *Shamma* was the common name spoken with bated breath, meaning "city of destruction" in a long-forgotten tongue. If one of their flock strayed near, they surrendered it to a certain fate. They did not worry their herding dogs would follow, for venturing within one league of Antolae, the curs would whine and whimper and slink back to their owners to cower beneath their legs. It was unfortunate that this young traveler had no dog to warn him, and that the sheepherders had only last month moved their flocks farther south to warmer winter climes. The entire week that he had

journeyed across a windswept, barren land, following a rutted cart road, he saw no one who could have given him warning. It was too bad indeed, for all the reassuring promises he had given to his aging mother of his safe return would not be kept. She, along with his younger brothers and sisters, would forever wonder in misery what tragedy had befallen him.

All emotion emptied from the traveler's mind and heart, leaving nothing but a dim curiosity that nudged him forward. Now, close, he heard bells jingling and sheep baaing, footsteps clacking briskly across stone, a pail sloshing with water, a giggle, chickens cackling. His heart warmed at the sounds of everyday life, sounds that removed any last vestige of hesitancy.

He stepped into the maw of blackness as if he had been swallowed whole; he left no footprint behind, nor any trace that he had crossed an invisible line. Yet, even if there had remained any sign of his passage, what good would it have done him? No one who entered that bewitched land ever came back out.

• PART ONE •

*“A Circle upon a Circle  
within a Circle . . .”*



# ONE

CALLLEN FELT Beren's eyes boring into the back of his neck long before he smelled the burly man's pipe tobacco. A tendril of smoke wended upward in front of the block of chestnut wood Callen leaned over, a rich aromatic scent that permeated the huge workroom and often lingered in his clothing and hair for days.

"Go a little lighter with the deep gouge, Callen lad," the master craftsman told him. "Here." He took the tool from Callen's hand and set his pipe in the wooden bowl on the worktable. "You've got to set your wrist so, or it'll get away from you. Especially working with the grain, as in this instance."

Callen watched closely as Beren's thick hand pressed the gouge along the penciled line on the wood. It swam through the grain like a knife through butter, leaving a smooth, even channel. A thin ribbon of dark wood twisted and fell to the planked floor of the shop. He pulled back and gestured to Callen with bright encouraging eyes. "See? Ah, your gouge is nice and sharp too, so the more need to ply with a steady hand."

Callen nodded and took the gouge back. Beren stepped past Callen's stool and studied the sketch pinned to the wall. He played with his thick, short beard, as he often did when thinking deeply. "Ambitious design. But it's coming along nicely."

Beren raised his voice and addressed the other apprentices in the room. His eyes lit on the lanky red-haired youth sitting at a workbench by the front door. “Dariel, this is why I harp on you young’uns about sharpening your tools. Callen here spends a good portion of time with his slip stone and, in the end, saves time and waste.” Beren laid a firm hand on Callen’s shoulder. “A master apprentice like Callen knows the value of a finely honed tool. You’d best follow his example.” Beren winked at Callen and strolled over to another student hunched over a workbench.

Callen examined the scrolled design he’d been tackling for the last few days. He had copied the pattern from a spandrel off the famous bridge in Sherbourne that crossed the river Heresh. With this lull in orders, Beren had him teaching the beginners and, in his spare time, Callen challenged himself with difficult designs he gleaned from the stacks of old parchments on Beren’s shelves.

He had spent much of his life carving furniture and small pieces like walking stick handles and ornamental bowls back in his home village of Tebron, but he yearned to craft something grander, more dramatic. Few if any took such an interest in ancient architectural styles, but Callen was enamored with the artful beauty and elegance of line found in the drawings of old buildings and bridges. This triangular piece, nearly two feet across, displayed entwining vines and swirls of interlocking ropes that gathered in the center around a circle of sycamore leaves. The channels ran deep and narrow, challenging Callen’s steady hand and skill.

Eliab stood and stretched kinks from his back, and came to Callen’s side. “That’s unbelievable, Cal.” His sawdust-ridden curls shook along with his head. “How are you able to do this?” Eliab picked up a stool and set it next to Callen so he could watch him work.

“Practice, that’s how. You’ll get there, if you apply yourself,” Callen said, “and have the talent.” Eliab and the other four students were first order, so Beren had them crafting simple things,

like turned legs for chairs and blind mortises for hinged cupboard doors. Callen had been here the longest—four years—and was therefore given the more complicated custom jobs that came into the shop. Because he had spent much of his life in the forests felling trees with his brother, Felas, he had entered his apprenticeship later than most students seeking a trade. To the boys around him, Callen was like an older brother, and they treated him as such—with respect and admiration, laced with practical jokes.

Callen thought how this new student reminded him so much of his brother Joran. He missed his three brothers and hadn't taken a break to see them in over a year. Only Felas had been able to visit last spring, and only for a few days. Living in the Logan Valley, or Loganvale as the locals called it, was so different from Tebron. Instead of towering trees and clinging fog, Callen enjoyed waking each morning to sunshine and warm breezes fragrant with the rich fertile loam that Loganvale was famous for. Farmers in this oak-strewn valley of gently rolling hills grew every kind of crop imaginable—from barley to hay to bogberries—and carted their produce out to distant towns and villages Callen had never heard of. Wine pressed from grapes in this region far excelled that of grapes grown elsewhere. The beer brewed from Loganvale hops tasted brighter and satisfied even the meanest thirst on a hot summer day. Now, spoiled by such year-round warmth and abundance, he wondered if he could ever live in Tebron again.

As Callen picked up his gouge, the front door blew open. Wood shavings flicked up from the floor and tables and danced in the air. Beren swung his head around as his wife, Laera, stepped inside the shop and let her eyes adjust to the dimmer light. A swath of bright sunlight spilled onto the floor, and Callen smelled hay waft in from the newly harvested fields. Through the open door he watched a horse-drawn carriage pass, hooves and wheels kicking up dust that drifted into the shop.

“Laera,” Beren yelled, “kindly shut that door behind you before that dirt sticks to every bit of fresh varnish.”

Laera, her dark eyes wide and excited, shut the door and rushed over to Beren’s side with her full skirts swishing on the floor. A rope of black hair lay over one of her shoulders, braided—Callen noted—much like the pattern carved in the wood block in front of him. Callen thought Laera was the most striking woman he had ever met. With her creamy skin and natural poise, he imagined she had been breathtaking in her younger days. Even at this age—Callen didn’t dare guess how old she was—she radiated a youthful energy and inquisitive spirit that caused all the students to grow enamored with her. Never having had children of her own, Laera adopted all who came to apprentice with her husband, spoiling them with mountains of delicious food and fussing over the slightest cut she found on anyone’s finger. Many of the younger students, first time away from home, found Laera’s comforting words a remedy for homesickness. Even Callen let her baby him from time to time, although at thirty-one he hardly needed coddling. A twinge of guilt poked him as he thought about his own mother back in Tebron in the care of his brother Maylon. Callen was overdue for a visit home, even if his mother now failed to recognize him and most other people.

“Have you heard this latest travesty?” Laera whispered to Beren, the fierce expression in her eyes pinning him in place. Callen turned his attention back to his carving, catching a quick, questioning glance from Eliab. The younger boy followed Callen’s hint and pretended he didn’t hear the scathing words pouring from Laera’s mouth. Beren stood a few feet away, his boots planted and his hands on his hips. Although only a couple of inches taller than his wife, Beren drew himself up like a bear and tucked in his chin.

“Let me guess—more railings about Ka’rel’s wife, no doubt. Woman, you just have to leave it alone.”

From the corner of his eye, Callen caught a flash of Laera's hand grabbing Beren's sleeve. "Beren, ever since Ka'rel married that witch, the manor has become a madhouse."

Beren sighed. "You've run into Azar at market." It was a statement, gleaned, apparently, from the tone in Laera's voice. "If you're so concerned, you owe it to your brother-in-law to tell him to his face."

Laera snorted and pursed her lips together. "You know he won't see me. He told me never to step foot in his home until I had kind words for Huldah. Can't you see what a spell she's cast over him? He nearly slobbers at her feet!"

"Laera, it's his life. You had no right to criticize his choice for a bride."

"—Whom he married only *weeks* after M'lynn's death. Come now, Beren, even you must think it odd for Ka'rel, who takes months just to choose between rye and wheat for his upper field, to rush into such a marriage." Laera lowered her voice and her face softened. "I'm worried about Jadiel. Azar has seen the way Huldah treats her. He says she beats the poor girl."

Beren pried Laera's fingers from his shirt and took her arm. Callen could tell by the look on Beren's face that he was growing weary of this conversation.

But Beren's intolerant look soon melted into a sweet smile. "Come now, love, you know Ka'rel's a proper father. He dotes on the girl, and he has the richest estate in all the vale. He gives her everything her heart desires. Surely he wouldn't let Jad come to harm, would he?"

He led her to the door and stopped. "I know you love Jadiel, and that you grieve with her over M'lynn's death. Nothing is harder than losing a mother at such a tender age." He brushed a hand across her cheek and wiped away tears. "But, Laera," Beren said softly, "you mustn't begrudge Ka'rel's comfort in a new wife. If she makes him happy—"



“Then why choose a stranger over a local woman? No one knows where Huldah comes from, what life she left behind. She just blew in with the wind one day and swept Ka’rel off his feet. He’s either lost his mind or she’s enchanted him somehow.”

Beren cocked his head. “Woman, you have a wild imagination.”

“And Jadiel hasn’t visited us once this year. Don’t you find that odd? Aren’t you the least bit worried over your niece?”

“Enough.” Beren let out a heavy sigh. “We’ll take a ride to Northfold Manor. Pay a friendly visit. Will that suffice?”

A rush of relief filled Laera’s eyes. She cracked open the door and leaned over and kissed his ruddy cheek. “Tomorrow,” she said, leaving no room for dispute.

Beren watched the door close behind his wife. Callen let out a breath and turned to Eliab, who appeared afraid to move. “Well,” Callen muttered, “back to work.”

They both looked over at Beren. Callen noted the scowl on his mentor’s face.

Eliab got up from the stool. “I think I’ll go practice on my lathe.”

Callen nodded, noting the somber mood draped over the room. He turned his attention back to his drawing, then picked up his gouge, and with a slight adjustment of his wrist, dug into the smooth, grainy wood and carved a perfect, deep channel.

## TWO

JADIEL THREW herself back onto the soft covers of her bed and let the autumn light bathe her face and neck. The smell of cut hay hung moist and heavy in the air. Fall was usually her favorite time of year, a time of bountiful harvest. But fall also reminded her of the apple tarts she used to make with her mother and the carriage rides they took through the woods where every leaf was ablaze with golden colors. The brisk hint of winter in the breeze coming through her window only sharpened her keen awareness of her mother's absence. She had tried to find solace in a walk along the creek, but it hadn't helped to alleviate her sorrow. Nothing could do that.

She let her eyes drift across the shelf of porcelain dolls her mother had bought her over the years. They stared down at her with glassy, empty eyes—not a one smiling—as if wondering why she neglected them so. How many hours had she spent dressing her dolls in their frilly smocks and untangling their long locks with the tiny brush she kept in her dresser? Not that many months ago she had found happiness in such simple play. And on her dresser lay the small silver flute she used to play in the evenings for her parents. She hadn't touched it since the day her mother died. Now, nothing brought a smile to her face except her treasured moments with Papa, and those were growing rare now that he had remarried.