

MENTAL DAMNATION DREAM

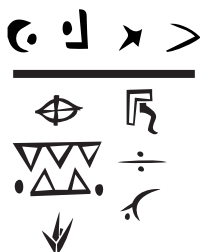
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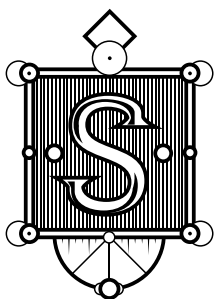
VOL II

KONN LAVERY

CHAPTER I



An Era Ends



sitting cross-legged, the motionless man exhaled steadily from his dry mouth. Eyes closed, he gradually followed the action with an inhale. His eyes remained shut, his full concentration on his breathing cycle. He ignored the cool floor and the subtle deep rumbling ambience that echoed throughout the chamber. His goal was to keep his mind as empty as possible.

Silence, he thought to himself. The man's bottom eyelid twitched slightly, realizing that a word had entered his mind. *No thoughts*, he thought. *Wait!*

"Damn it," he muttered to himself. His eyes slowly peeled open as he came to the realization that he had broken his moment of bliss. The concentration he'd invested into clearing his head of thoughts was now gone. A surge of frustration coursed through his veins: the slight burning sensation of anger. The same anger he'd concentrated on suppressing over his years of training as a paladin—a warrior of the light.

As descendants of a holy bloodline known as paladins, his kind had

abilities that matched the angels. The power given to the paladins was from another era; an era when God believed man was worthy of such gifts. Paladins had to meditate daily to retain a connection with their lord, heightening the holy ability fused to their physical being.

When one could not focus on their meditation, it was more than frustrating.

The man scanned the surrounding space, a chamber that served as the primary meditation area in the Temple of Zeal. Large marble columns stretched from floor to ceiling in the four corners of the square room, supporting the intricately carved illustrations of winged men above. The flooring had three circular designs overlapping one another painted in the centre where he sat. He gazed straight toward the stained-glass windows filled with varying shades of beige, yellow, and red. The sun beamed into the chamber and tinted the area with the hue of the glass.

Through all my years in the temple, even with the holy gifts blessed upon me by our lord, I still can't master something as simple as meditation. He shook his head and stood, staring directly at the centre stained-glass piece: an image of a shirtless man with a crown of thorns piercing into his head.

Despite following the practices of my mentors and the words of God, the Creator . . . the man thought to himself while marching out of the chamber. He walked beyond the circular painting toward two large wooden doors reinforced with black painted steel. He pushed the handle plates open with one hand on each door, moving them aside so he could enter the hallway beyond: a long, narrow passage with marble sculptures lining either side.

If only the temple's spiritual training came as easy as using a weapon, he thought. Physical tasks were something the man had always preferred. Using his mind to master his consciousness seemed to be a waste of time. He had his foundational beliefs and didn't understand the need to meditate to find anything more.

"Brother Zalphium." A masculine voice came from down the hall. Zalphium looked up; a man was marching toward him, clad in the same matching gold-plated armour that he himself wore.

"Brother Franch." Zalphium returned the greeting with a nod. The two of them converged, stopping merely a foot apart.

"I hope you were able to come to some sort of epiphany through your meditation," said Franch.

"Unfortunately, no. I find my mind is unable to quiet itself enough to find what it needs to. Especially in a time like this."

Franch brushed his red beard with his hand and sighed. "I am sorry to hear that."

"The blade is something that I identify with far easier than delving into a mental foundation that is already seamless. It's essentially running my mind around in circles."

"You raise a good point. Keep in mind, though: unless you challenge your mindset, you will never broaden your consciousness. We may already out-live any normal man by several centuries, but that doesn't mean you can brush aside any training of wisdom."

"Yes, as our mentors have told us," said Zalphium. "I feel it serves no purpose to me, though. I am far better off perfecting my combat skills so I can further serve the Paladins of Zeal on the front lines, spreading the word of God and cleansing the world of Dega'Mostikas's evil."

"If meditating is difficult at a time like this, that is precisely why you need to meditate. Eliminate your weaknesses. You must seek answers about why you remain so disturbed by it."

Zalphium folded his arms. "Perhaps because all we did during the Drac Age was fight. I think that is all I know."

"You're not a soldier, Zalphium. You're a paladin. The days of battling the draconem with swords and blood are over."

"I'm not a soldier anymore, but I was. It becomes difficult to remove that mindset from one's head. During the war, we had to be certain of who we were when fighting those monsters."

"Hence why you need to meditate," said Franch. "Face the inner demons that trouble your thoughts so they do not corrupt you."

"You know what troubles me? Even through all the struggles we went through during the Drac Age, ending their tyranny and bringing the world out of the darkest era it has ever seen, we are still following the draconem's steps in every way."

"Are you referring to the vazelead exile? You do recall Saule found evidence of the reptilian people serving the last Drac Lord, Karazickle? They are not worthy of being anywhere in the charted world."

"I know this, but is exile to the underworld really necessary?"

Franch extended his hand while turning back the way he came. "Walk with me, brother."

The two began to move farther down the hall, strolling side by side while passing numerous closed doors on each side of the path.

Franch kept his hand behind his back and sighed. "I understand what you are proposing: that our actions mimic the harsh tyranny of the Drac Lords. Their goal was to eliminate all other life. I disagree that we are following their ways. We are only exiling the vazelead people to the underworld, not annihilating them."

"How is exile to that harsh environment any different? You know the stories as well as I do—the heat, the winds, and the utter darkness. We both know that Saule and the Council of Just chose the underworld because they knew of its conditions, how it mutates people into fiends. No one comes out of there the same. There is something otherworldly down there."

"The vazelead people will never return from underworld, so we do not have to worry about what they will become from the metamorphosis fumes in the air. We are preparing a banishment ritual."

Zalphium's eyes widened. *A Prayer of Power*. "But that will keep them shackled there for eternity!"

"Yes. The vazelead people are not like us; they pose a threat that must be addressed. You cannot deny that."

"Perhaps they are an opposition, but I do not believe that this is morally any different than the actions of the Drac Lords. Do you really think God approves such actions?"

Franch shrugged. "We tried to convert the vazelead people when we enslaved them decades ago. Now that they are free, they retain little of what we taught them about the civilized world. They're animals, not human."

The two pushed open a set of wooden doors leading out onto a stone balcony that extended along the outer wall of the marble temple. Beyond the balcony's cylindrical stone railings was a vast and steep mountain-scape, covered in snow and dark charcoal rocks. The sun overlooked the clear blue sky, shining down on the ice and reflecting a bright white light directly at the temple. A single dirt path

in the distance led to the base of the Temple of Zeal, directly below where Zalphium and Franch stood.

I never tire of the view of Mount Kuzuchi, Zalphium thought briefly. Through the debate with his comrade, the mountain-view provided him a moment of peace.

Franch extended his hand. “The Council of Just wills the banishment of the vazelead people, and we must obey. They led us out of the Drac Age and are responsible for ensuring such a threat never arises again.”

“They also traded for witchcraft from the nymphs to do so.”

“The politics with the kingdoms and nymphs is a whole other discussion. Regardless of the technicalities, you need not question the will of the Council of Just.” Franch grinned. “You were the one telling me that you don’t want to challenge your intellect, so why question clear instructions?”

Zalphium frowned. “I don’t want to challenge my mind’s moral foundation—not my critical thinking. This action does not follow the Paladins of Zeal code of morality that the Creator has given us. I may have followed orders without question during the Drac Age, but now that the war is over I do not agree with the Council of Just’s choices. We would be better off sending out missionaries once more to convert the vazelead people to the light.”

“Not if they are serving the Drac Lord Karazickle. If this is the case, they have chosen their side and we must take the opportunity to prevent another war.”

“With a banishment to the underworld? It’s practically sending them down to Dega’Mostikas’s Triangle!”

Franch shrugged. “It is a devilish landscape, I will agree with that. Not that I’ve seen it personally.”

“Subjecting them to the mutation is murdering them.”

“The Council of Just is wise, as is Saule, who was chosen to lead the council. They would have thought about conversion as well. We simply cannot take the any chances.”

The two continued to walk on the balcony, following it along the outer rim of the temple. Franch kept his gaze to the floor as Zalphium stared out at the mountains.

Zalphium brushed his dirty blond hair from his face and looked over to his comrade. “Do these questions ever haunt your mind,

Brother Franch?"

"No. I put my trust in Saule's leadership."

"How did he discover this knowledge about Karazickle and the vazelead people, though?" asked Zalphium. "Where is the proof? I've never seen a vazelead champion the Drac Lord's winged-moon symbol."

"True, but they spoke a weak form of Draconic before we discovered them. There's one link."

"How do we know Saule's sources regarding Karazickle are credible?"

Franch stopped in his tracks and turned to face Zalphium. "I am your temple brother, and you're lucky I am also your friend. That kind of talk amongst the other paladins would be met with rehabilitation."

"I know." Zalphium folded his arms. "That is why I am asking you. I know you are on my side."

"To answer you, no we do not. I don't think anyone knows how he found that information."

"That is what makes me sceptical of the whole thing. Which is also why I do not want to be a part of it."

"It's already in the process as we speak. From what I heard, the last tribe was gathered at the base of Mount Kuzuchi, near Kuzuchi Forest. The rest of the paladins in the temple will be joining our brothers and the Knight's Union at the top of the mountain."

"I will pass."

"This will not look good to the others, Zalphium. You should include yourself in the ritual. We need all the manpower we have to channel the banishment prayer."

"I have full faith that our brothers are capable of finishing it on their own. I cannot fully invest in something that I do not believe in." Zalphium gestured to the far end of the temple, where they were headed. "I'd rather practice my agility in the chamber of endurance."

"That will be there any other day."

"I am sorry, brother. I cannot join you. I must stick to my beliefs."

Franch stopped in his tracks and nodded. "You are bold, Zalphium. I admire that greatly—but it makes you a fool at times."

"As I said, I have my core principles from God. I will not stray from them. I believe this banishment is against everything we stand for."

Franch smiled. "As any paladin must do. It is why we were blessed

with divine powers from the Father.”

Zalphium placed his hand on Franch’s shoulder. “Indeed.”

Franch patted his brother’s arm. “I must prepare with the others. We leave on horseback within the hour.”

“Go now. I will see you when you return.”

The two bowed before each other and parted ways, Zalphium continuing to the chamber of endurance and Franch returning to the doorway they’d come through.

He sees my view but doesn’t understand it, Zalphium thought to himself while marching down the pathway. His hands were clenched. The discussion had upset him, knowing that he could not convince his friend of the error of their ways. If not Franch, he would be unable to convince any of the Paladins of Zeal that he was right. And by not participating in the vazelead people’s banishment, he would prove himself to be an outcast amongst his own kind.

I’ll be a reject. The thought made him sick. He simply did not understand how they could not see what he saw.

Zalphium turned to look at the mountain landscape, feeling a cool breeze pick up, blowing gently against his face. He inhaled through his nostrils, letting the brisk air fill his lungs. He understood the paranoia amongst the humans and why they would want to banish an entire race if they potentially posed a threat. The world was a beautiful place, especially the Kingdom of Zingalg, the home of Mount Kuzuchi

It’s why we fought so bravely during the Drac Age . . . for this.

A part of him felt a duty to join the other paladins in the banishment, but he had to stand his moral ground. If he didn’t, where would the line be drawn? He could only pray that his fellow paladins would understand his justification.

Directly below the balcony, Zalphium spotted several dozen cavalry on the base level of the temple. The horses of various colours were clad in steel-plated armour with saddles on top of their backs. They were prepped for the journey up Mount Kuzuchi where the entrance to the underworld stood.

Beside the horses were paladins in golden armour and deep red tunics, polishing their weapons and making last-minute adjustments to the horses’ armour.

My fellow paladins, readying themselves to perform a banishment

prayer.

Zalphium had never performed a Prayer of Power of that size on his own; these special prayers required a lot of mental strength. He was only good at simple tasks like healing and casting light. It was a weakness of his. He knew that paladins who could master the banishment prayer were capable of constraining a person—or a group of people—into a location for eternity. If they got enough paladins together, all channelling their prayers, they could banish an entire race.

If the banished person or people attempted to leave the area, they would be dragged back by glowing shackles. To the untrained eye, one would think that the spontaneous appearance of shackles around the beings' limbs pulling them back was some sort of witchcraft. It wasn't, though; it was simply the power of God channelled through the divine abilities of the paladins. These powers were what separated paladins from the rest of the mortal world—a direct link to the heavens.

Our power doesn't change the fact that we are still human. We sin individually and in large numbers, Zalphium thought while pulling open a wooden door before entering a chamber twice the size of the meditation room.

The chamber was filled with rows of marble columns extending to the opposite end of the room, where target dummies made of linen and stuffed with hay were lined up. There were fewer windows in this room than in the meditation chamber, which made the room much darker. Only small stained-glass windows ran along the top of the walls, providing a gradient of light that dimmed progressively from floor to ceiling.

Each row of columns had unique obstacles such as pits, walls, spikes, and pillars. All were used by the paladins for their training exercises. It was the endurance chamber of the temple, where Zalphium preferred to spend his time.

This will keep my mind off all this banishment nonsense. To Zalphium, the banishment was a dark time for humanity and he was frustrated in his inability to change the course of events. He felt it was best to keep his focus on something else. Something simple that would not frustrate him.

No more meditating today, he thought.

Zalphium stepped farther into the chamber, walking along the side so he could look down one of the rows of columns to inspect the obstacles. He wanted to find a challenge that would require all his focus so he could forget about the worldly events that were taking place.

After a couple of rows, he paused at one with a series of smaller pillars scattered in between the columns.

This will do, he thought while stretching his legs as a warmup.

After a couple of minutes of stretching, he took a deep breath while extending his left leg and prepared his muscles.

Focus. Breathe in . . . and out, he instructed himself. Without further waiting he dashed forward, lifting his entire body from his left leg to enter a daring sprint.

Within seconds he rushed into the series of columns, approaching the first pillar directly in his path. Only about half an inch from the pillar he leaped to his right, preserving his momentum. He continued to dodge upcoming pillars as he ran, maintaining a constant speed through the row.

The whole dash took well under the time any normal human could achieve even without the heavy plated armour that Zalphium wore. This was his specialty: agility and combat. As fast as the eye could follow, he dashed to the opposite end of the room, shifting past the last pillar and stomping his foot just past the series of columns. No sweat ran down his face and his breath was steady and measured as it was before he started.

One down, he thought, turning to face the row of columns again. This was a task he would spend hours doing. Running the pillars once was nothing to him. He had started doing these exercises from an early age and had grown used to building endurance. He didn't start feeling fatigue until he reached a hundred repetitions, minimum.

Once again, he prepped his dash and charged down the hall. Zalphium pushed himself to move more nimbly than the previous run, constantly challenging his own best. The second run proved no different than the first; he showed no signs of tiring.

He continued to repeat this task for several hours, running back and forth, dodging the pillars and increasing his speed with each sprint. After about sixty sets back and forth Zalphium stopped on the

far end of the chamber with the combat dummies. Sweat ran down his forehead as he brushed his wet hair aside, exhaling heavily.

That will do, he thought to himself while exiting the chamber into the connecting hallway. He marched down the hall toward the bathing pool as he always did after training. It was a natural hot spring on Mount Kuzuchi that they used to clean themselves and spend leisure time.

Reaching the door, he stepped into the humid room. Despite the white mist covering most of the details, he could still make out the general shape of the square pillars, the cavern ceiling, and the rectangular bathing area where bubbles rose to the surface of the water from the heat. Off to the side of the entrance was a rack with fresh towels.

Often paladins would come to the pool to lounge, chat with one another, or simply take a break from their hard training and duties. The bathing pool, along with the Temple of Zeal, was a haven for all paladin kind.

After I wash off this mess I will return to my study, Zalphium thought while unbuckling his armour, placing it beside the edge of the pool. He carefully removed his necklace, placing the leather-laced golden cross on top of his armour.

When Zalphium was not on duty—as he should have been that day—he spent his days following a strict routine of meditation, intense physical training, and research in the temple’s library. Each of the paladins specialized in a form of study. Some of them focused on prayers, biblical history, politics, or in Zalphium’s case, draconem. His fellow paladins questioned his choice of study considering that the Drac Age was over.

They tell me that my studies are obsolete now—that no one studies draconem anymore. He shook his head while dipping his naked herculean body into the hot water. He washed himself from head to toe, trying to keep his thoughts off the vazelead banishment. It was difficult for him to do; the act the paladins were about to commit went against all the morals they had been handed down by God.

I shouldn’t overthink it; there’s nothing I can do now. What’s done is done. I should accept what I cannot change, he thought while washing the remaining dirt from his skin.

After washing himself clean, Zalphium got out of the pool and dried himself before putting his clothing and armour back on. The last item he put on was his cross necklace, placing it over his head and letting the pendant drape across his chest plate. It was the symbol of his saviour and offered him reassurance of God's presence, as it did for all paladins.

He moved back through the entrance to the bathing pool chamber, returning to the cool, bright hallway. The sun shined directly into the hall, casting sharp shadows as it lowered in the west; the day was coming to an end. His steps echoed as he marched toward the study. Never had the temple been so vacant. It normally buzzed with paladins moving between chambers or standing and chatting amongst one another.

The quietness is rather welcoming for a change, he noted while examining the vacant space.

The walk came to an end with an open doorway leading into the library. Every wall was covered in shelves that reached the ceiling, so tall that a ladder was needed to reach most books. Few shelf spaces were empty; most were packed with books ranging from leather-bound to simple stacks of paper, all organized alphabetically by topic and author. Several oak tables were also set up for studying, prepped with chairs and lanterns for when the sun set. It was the smallest of the chambers, but this did not mean it was the least useful. It happened to be one of the most valued rooms in the temple. Through their crusades, the paladins collected every book they found, keeping and preserving as much knowledge as possible.

What to focus on in a time like this? he wondered. It hadn't occurred to Zalphium what he would study. He was too preoccupied with his frustration at the unprecedented event taking place. He stepped to the nearest bookshelf to examine some of the spines to see if anything could catch his attention.

Draconem has always been my study of choice. But is it truly relevant to our current path? Ideally, he wanted to find something that was related to the vazelead banishment. *What do we have on dictating the fate of an entire race?* The thought amused him, as he knew the topic was too specific for the library to have anything of the sort.

Zalphium strolled deeper into the library, looking at each bookshelf

carefully to locate a topic that sparked his interest; anything that would offer some sort of insight into what his brothers were about to do.

Zingalg Botany . . . Zingalg Tribal Regions . . . A Guided History of the Nymphs . . . Origin of the Trolls . . . Wait! He stopped in his tracks when he noticed a book titled *Draconem: Before the War*. It had a black leather-bound cover with steel-reinforced edges.

How have I not seen this book before? he thought while squinting. It was odd considering he had visited library for years and had studied most of the books about draconem.

It might give some insight, he thought while recalling his conversation with Franch about vazeleads speaking Draconic. Perhaps there was a link between the two species after all.

Zalphium pulled on the book, but it remained fixed in the shelf. He tightened his grip and yanked firmly. The book tilted forward and the sound of grinding stone reverberated throughout the library.

Zalphium stepped back, eyes wide, and watched the book slide back inward as the shelf retreated to the side, revealing a passageway.

"What?" he said aloud in pure surprise. The Paladins of Zeal were transparent with one another, so a hidden passageway in the temple was quite unusual. If he did not know about it, surely the others did not either. Zalphium had to find out where it led.

The hidden hallway was pitch black, making it impossible to see what was inside. Zalphium rushed to the nearest study table to grab one of the lanterns. It had a candle inside, yet no flame.

Zalphium opened the lantern and extended his hand directly over the wax. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, calming his breathing from the excitement of discovering the mysterious hallway.

"God, our Saviour, help us to follow the light and live the truth. Grant me flame so I may reveal what lurks in the shadows. Amen." He opened his eyes as a surge of light pulsated from the cross pendant on his neck, channelling through his chest plate and into his skin. He could feel the tingling warmth run past his torso and through his extended arm down to his fingertips.

A small spark of flame ignited from the palm of his hand, shooting onto the wax candle and projecting light from the lantern.

Zalphium smiled while closing the lantern and taking it by the

handle. Casting light was one of the more simplistic Prayers of Power—one he had no trouble performing.

He marched back to the hidden passageway, gripping the lantern tightly while eyeing the darkness of the hall.

“Here we go,” he muttered to himself while stepping beyond the bookshelves and into the darkness.

The candle wasn’t exceptionally bright, but it did provide some light as he entered the passage. The flooring, walls, and ceiling were made of the same stone as the library. It was a little dusty, which made it difficult to breathe, but that was of little importance to Zalphium—he had to learn what this hallway was for and report it to the temple.

Paranoia stuck Zalphium briefly as he realized perhaps he should have brought some sort of weapon for facing the unknown.

Nonsense, he thought. This was the Temple of Zeal; there wasn’t going to be any beast or foe—or so he hoped.

The hallway seemed to extend forever at a gradual downward slope. He walked with caution, keeping the lantern facing ahead to light the way. The light only provided a couple of paces’ worth of sight; he was still practically walking blind. What he could see, though, he scanned intensely. He eyed the flooring for cracks and the walls for any holes—potential booby-traps. It all remained sealed, marking the path as safe.

After several dozen more paces from the passage entrance, the hallway came to an end where a staircase led deeper into the unknown. He persisted onward, descending the stairs until he reached the bottom where he encountered a closed stone door. A circular copper doorknob was attached to the far right.

Glancing at the floor, he saw there were curved scrapes from the edge of the door to the wall—signs of the stone door moving. Zalphium concluded that the door could be opened with ease.

This hallway has been used recently, he realized while reaching outward with his free hand to twist and pull the handle. It was far heavier than the book leading into the hallway, but he was able to grip it tight enough to move it.

The sound of grinding stone filled the air as he pulled with all his might, forcing the stone door open. Once there was enough space to move through, Zalphium stopped and stepped through the doorway

and into an open, dark space. On the left and right side of the doorway there were unlit torches.

He took the candle from the lantern and carefully leaned the flame onto the first torch, causing it to light up within seconds—he noted the smell of burning oil.

Oil? This room was used too recently, he thought while turning to light the second torch.

After both torches were lit, enough light was provided so he could see the whole room under a warm yellow tint. The light revealed several suits of armour mounted in steel and glass cabinets off to the far end, one shoulder of each suit draped with a deep red cape. In front of the armour was a large black wooden desk with papers and stones scattered across it.

What is this place? Zalphium wondered while placing the candle back into the lantern, closing it, and stepping deeper into the room.

Shelving lined the top of the wall all along the room, holding trophies made of metal, gold, and colourful gems. Several large claymores and a shield were mounted just below the shelves. Each one had engravings of crosses, eyes, and other markings Zalphium recognized as symbols of paladin kind.

“I know some of these weapons,” he spoke aloud while brushing his sandy blond hair aside. He had seen their leader, Saule, sport the gear during the Drac Age. *What are they doing down here?* he thought, stepping deeper into the room. *Does our leader have a chamber hidden from his brethren?*

Instantly Zalphium’s eyes were drawn to the far-right wall where a painting hung. It portrayed a moon and draconic wings erupting from behind it. Just below the painting was a deep blue robe decorated with a moon-shaped symbol on the chest.

“No . . .” he muttered to himself while staring directly at the moon icon on the robe. The icon was clear as day to Zalphium. It was the memorable moon of Karazickle, Drac Lord of the night.

This doesn’t make any sense. Zalphium was flabbergasted, yet his eyes did not deceive him. His countless years of study did not make him a fool who would not recognize draconem symbols, especially the Drac Lord Karazickle moon.

There’s got to be an explanation for this. Zalphium turned his back to

the robe and the painting, trying to justify their presence to himself. He brought his attention to a bookshelf that housed hundreds of old, worn scrolls. On a desk near the shelf were linen paper, a quill, and a red ink bottle. One of the papers was unrolled and pinned down with bright, polished, blue and green rocks.

Zalphium leaned closer, feeling the veins in his body tingle. The scroll had swirled lines of varying weights, outlined with dots and straight lines. He gasped, recognizing the Draconic alphabet. He took another deep breath and read the glyphs of the scroll in more detail. He recognized the words from his studies: It was a formula which granted draconem shape-shifting abilities. From his research, Zalphium knew draconem could retain their new shape—whatever shape they wished—for as long as they pleased, but once they morphed back to their natural body, the shape-shifting ability ended.

The paladin felt ill as he put the pieces together in his mind. He wanted to believe it was a hoax, but seeing Saule's armour, the moon crescent of Karazickle on the painting, the robe, the scrolls, and the shape-shifting formula was too much. It all added up: the paladin leader was truly Karazickle, the last of the Drac Lords, in human form.

"It cannot be," he muttered. Turning his head, he saw a jar of human teeth on the bookshelf with the scrolls. Draconem that consumed humans vomited their skeletons back up for easy digestion, and many were known to take teeth as trophies of their kills.

Zalphium clenched his jaw and snatched up one of the coloured stones, hurling it at the glass jar with all his built-up fury. The rock smashed into the jar, shattering it into hundreds of pieces. The teeth poured out on the floor, scattering.

The Drac Lord has deceived us, he thought while grabbing the scroll from the desk and storming out of the hidden chamber.

It was most dreadful news that he had ever discovered. Their leader was a fraud. Zalphium was certain that God had led him there; how else could he have found the chamber? Regardless, the discovery ignited many more questions in his mind: Had Saule always been Karazickle? Or did the Drac Lord kill Saule and take his place? He suddenly remembered the vazeleads. Why did Karazickle want to banish the vazelead people? Saule coincidentally happened to be the leader of the Council of Just—did they know of this exploitation?

How could have we foreseen this? Zalphium thought to himself. His mind was burning with questions about the discovery that he knew would not be resolved anytime soon.

None of the questions could be answered at that exact moment. Right now, Zalphium had to leave the Temple of Zeal and reunite with his brethren atop Mount Kuzuchi, where the banishment was taking place. He had to show the Paladins of Zeal and the Knight's Union proof regarding Saule's identity.

Zalphium rushed out of the hidden passageway and back into the library. He hurried through the Temple of Zeal to gather his belongings and prepare to leave on horseback. He glanced out the nearest window while he ran down the hall. The sun was nearly set, meaning it would be dark soon. The travel to the top of Mount Kuzuchi would take several hours.

After sprinting through several hallways, the paladin burst through the door into his quarters. He tucked the scroll into his belt, then placed the lantern on the nearby nightstand. Hastily, Zalphium snagged his sheathed sword from the wall and tied it to his belt then grabbed the shield beside it, strapping it over his shoulder so it rested on his back.

Wasting no time, he blew out the candle in the lantern and exited the quarters so quickly he left the door open. It didn't matter; if he didn't get to the mountaintop to expose the Drac Lord in time, the Paladins of Zeal might do something that morally wrong at the hands of Karazickle.

Zalphium hurried down to the base level of the temple from the long staircase that led to the entryway, the largest room in the temple. The doors had been left open when his brethren left, allowing him to rush out to the horse stables. He made it to the wooden shelter to find that there were still several horses left behind, though they didn't have their armour or caparisons. Most likely they were spare horses.

The paladin opened the gate to one stall that housed a black horse. He rushed to the far end where he could grab its saddle that rested on a wooden bench. As quickly as he could, Zalphium harnessed the horse and mounted.

"Go!" he shouted while lashing the reins, encouraging the horse to

dash out of the stables.

Zalphium felt the cool wind on his face, blowing his hair out of the way as the horse rushed down the dirt path, leaving the Temple of Zeal behind.

There was little time to spare. Considering how long Zalphium had spent in his sprinting exercises and bathing, he knew the other paladins were most likely at the top of the mountain already. The Temple of Zeal was built high up the rocky landscape far from other civilized areas in Zingalg. It provided the paladins a sense of isolation so they could focus on their training and not be bothered by worldly affairs. *Not this time, though*, Zalphium thought. It appeared that they had corruption from within all along.

The path split into a fork: the left led down the mountain and the right led farther up, inclining drastically.

Zalphium spurred the horse to go faster, to the point he could hear it wheeze to catch its breath. He felt sympathetic for the animal as he knew he was pushing it to its limits. However, this was not a time for the horse to enjoy an easy stroll. The fate of an entire race was at stake.

The paladin and his steed continued ascending, enduring the progressively colder climate and sharp winds up the mountain. The terrain transitioned from rock and snow to pure snow. Zalphium could see the footprints of thousands of beings on the ground. A mixture of boots, hooves and claws—claws being, he knew, from the vazelead people.

Even blotches of black blood could be seen on the snow, most likely due to the humans aggressively driving the reptilians to move faster. Farther up the road he spotted a few corpses littering the pathway. Passing them he could see the brown scaly tails and clawed hands and feet of the bodies—vazeleads that could not keep up with the humans' forced march.

This must end, he thought.

Zalphium began to feel the snow build up on his eyebrows and eyelashes as they went even higher. The feeling of the cold air biting at his cheeks and nose became prevalent.

Keep going, he urged himself, ignoring the cold, the blood on the ground, and the horse's desire to slow down. He had no other option;

this had to be done.

Time seemed to be a blur for him rushing up the mountain; what was over several hours of horseback riding felt like mere minutes. The paladin was too focused on his goal to pay attention to details such as impatience of time. The only indicator he had of how much time had passed was that the sun had set. He had ridden well beyond the clouds, revealing a pure night sky and countless stars accompanying the moon.

The steep climb gave way to flatter travel at the top of the mountain. Zalphium was high enough now that a faint chanting could be heard from above through the sharp winds. This was common; it was only the angels in the heavens singing their continual tune.

“Faster!” Zalphium urged the horse as they approached a wide pathway. Rock formations created sharp walls on both sides, forming a passageway leading to a wide-open area at the centre of the mountaintop. Beyond the path, mass groups of humanoids seemed to writhe en masse, some panicking and others taking aggressive actions to push the others toward the centre.

“No!” Zalphium shouted, realizing that the humans were already forcing the vazelead people toward the massive pit in the middle of the mountain that descended into the underworld. *There is still time*, he reassured himself.

Rushing through the passageway, the paladin could fully grasp the scene at the summit. A massive pit about a third of the total area was in the centre of the landscape. Glowing gold chains ran all along the rim of the hole, channelling from the far end of the canyon where a group of hundreds of gold-plated men stood in a circle, chanting to one another. They were too far for Zalphium to hear but he knew that they were performing the banishment Prayer of Power. The glowing chains were the result of their prayer.

Screams erupted from the scene as silver-plated men—Knight’s Union—and other gold-plated men lashed their spears and swords at the horrified reptilian humanoids. The vazeleads hissed and cried for help as they fumbled over top of one another due to the shackles and chains that bound them in pairs.

The vazeleads that moved too slowly were pierced by the weapons and left to bleed, forcing their shackled comrade to drag their dying

corpse with them to avoid being next.

This is madness! Zalphium thought while shaking his head.

Scanning the scene, the paladin's eyes widened when a commanding voice echoed through the chaos, shouting. "Continue to round them up toward the pit!"

Zalphium glared off to the side of the chanting paladins. There was a large boulder, upon which a gold-plated man stood, his billowing red cape blowing in the wind. He grinned wickedly as his wavy hair flew into his face—Saule, the Paladins of Zeal's leader.

"This ends here. Hiya!" Zalphium spurred the horse forward, dodging the stray vazeleads and humans who were on the outskirts of the chaos so he could get as close to the paladins as he could.

Taking a deep breath, the rogue paladin shouted, "Karazickle! Drac Lord of the night!" His voice was so strident through the all the noise, so devastating, that it even silenced the distant angels.

Zalphium brought his horse to a halt and glanced around to see that, for the moment, the fighting had stopped. Many of the humans and vazeleads glanced around to see where the shout had come from. He snatched the scroll from his belt and held it high in the air. "Brothers! Saule is a fraud! He lied to us! He is the Drac Lord Karazickle!"

"This is absurd!" Lord Saule's voice echoed over the summit.

Zalphium scanned the faces that watched him; humans and vazeleads alike seemed more confused about his statement than anything else. Even two young vazeleads not too far from him, chained together, had faces painted with confused expressions at his bold statement.

"Banish Brother Zalphium with the vazelead people!" Saule ordered.

Within moments several men approached Zalphium; one of them was a paladin while the other two were knights.

Damn it, Zalphium thought. He'd been too caught up with his discovery to formulate a legitimate case to argue against Saule. "Brothers," he spoke while unrolling the scroll. "We have all learned to recognize the symbols on this scroll! Behold—a formula for transmogrification, found in a secret chamber belonging to Saule!"

"Zalphium!" an approaching paladin shouted while taking off his gold helmet, revealing his red beard and brown hair. It was Franch. "What are you doing?" he asked, sheathing his sword.

The two knights beside Franch continued to march toward Zalphium with their weapons drawn.

Franch slammed his gauntlet into the nearest knight's head. "Stop for a moment, fool!"

One of the knights shook his head and spoke in a hoarse voice. "Paladin, you did hear Saule's orders?"

Franch shook his head. "Give me a moment with Brother Zalphium." He stepped forward and nodded. "I warned you not to oppose Saule's will. Everyone obeys him; see how mindlessly these two knights were complying without question?" He glanced back to see the knights had stepped closer, gripping their weapons tightly and ready to strike.

"Let me see the scroll," Franch demanded.

Zalphium extended his hand, giving him the document.

Franch sighed. "I will be in disciplined for disobeying a direct order and looking at this." He unrolled the scroll and his eyes widened while they scanned back and forth. "My God. . ." He lowered the scroll. "Zalphium, how?"

"I don't know." He pointed at the oncoming knights. "Let them know. We have to stop this senseless banishment!"

Franch turned around and raised the scroll. "He's right! Brother Zalphium has indeed found a formula of transmogrification!"

The two knights in front of them stopped in their march and glanced at each other.

"What do we do?" the hoarse-voiced knight asked.

"Warn the others. Hurry!" Zalphium shouted. He glanced back up at Saule, drawing his sword in the process. "Karazickle, Drac Lord of the night! Reveal yourself at once!"

Franch pressed the edges of his hands against his mouth to amplify his voice while ordering, "Cease the banishment!"

"Stop, men!" shouted the hoarse-voiced knight.

Deep maniacal laughing slowly rose from the depths of Saule's throat. Its frequency was so low it caused the ground to vibrate as the laughter boomed throughout the canyon.

"Well done, young paladin," Saule sneered in the same deep, unnatural voice, exposing his teeth as sharp fangs. "But the banishment cannot be stopped!"

Zalphium scanned the scenery to see that most of the knights and

paladins had not heard them and were too invested in their task. The large herds of vazelead people were round up like cattle, forced by the humans to leap into the giant black pit or be stabbed to death.

"We can't stop them!" Franch shouted.

Zalphium wiped his face, feeling a deep level of defeat while watching the last few hundred vazeleads around the rim be pushed into the underworld's entrance. Their screams dwindled in the distance as they fell into the unknown. The glowing chains from the Prayer of Power unnaturally snapped open to bind the vazeleads by the ankles as they fell. The gold chains then disintegrated as the reptilians dropped deeper into the pit.

Zalphium's heart felt heavy with the knowledge that he had been unable to rescue the vazelead people in time. Now that they had leaped beyond the rim of glowing chains—the banishment Prayer of Power—and into the underworld, they would be trapped there for eternity.

"This ends here," Zalphium snarled while turning to face Saule.

The paladin leader waved his hands in various formations and patterns, moving faster and faster until he extended his hand into the air with a boom of thunder.

Black and grey clouds quickly rose to swarm the skyline, shrouding the stars as a heavy wind picked up. Snow and ice began to rain down from the darkened clouds at high speeds in an aggressive blizzard.

"That's not possible! We're far higher than the clouds. We're practically near the heavens!" Franch exclaimed, eyeing the blackening sky.

"It is possible for the Drac Lord of the night." Zalphium spoke while extending his hand. "Brother Franch, we must stop Saule."

Franch grabbed Zalphium's hand and leaped, joining Zalphium on his tired steed.

"We may have lost the war, but you haven't rid the world of the Drac Lords!" Saule shouted just before his neck cracked, forcing his head to violently swing back and forth, hair flailing. His skull extended forward, forming a wide, reptilian muzzle. The man's arms and torso tensed, curling inward while his body grew drastically, forcing the gold-plated armour to shred like paper from the immense force. A bulge ripped through his behind, forming a black-spiked tail

that swayed side to side. His ever-hardening skin began to morph and re-shape around the skeleton jerking violently inside. The motion caused his torso and limbs to twist in unnatural positions. His skin shred open and white scales tore through, his fingernails and toenails extending into black claws. The shoulder blades rose outward, skin stretching to form giant bat-like wings. The newly morphed white-scaled being stomped on the ground, crushing the boulder Saule previously stood on to rubble as if it were made of snow.

“You certainly weren’t lying.” Franch exhaled heavily. “That’s the bastard, Karazickle.”

Zalphium couldn’t help but smirk at his comrade’s choice of words. “Bastard indeed.” He lashed the reins, forcing the horse to pick up the pace.

The paladins’ armour clanged as ice shards hit their plating, some so sharp that it dented the armour.

“Christ!” Franch shouted.

“Brace yourself!” Zalphium replied.

The Drac Lord stood on his hind legs and spread his giant wings, flapping them several times and leaping into the air. The sheer size of his wingspan obscured the moon. Between the draconem, the clouds, and the thick blizzard, the entire scene was left in darkness.

Franch extended his one hand high into the air shouting, “Our father, help us to follow the light and live the truth. Grant us sight in the darkest of times. Bless us with your eternal light!” Franch’s armour lit up and his entire body glowed brightly, casting a soft light that projected for about two hundred paces around them.

Several other bursts of light were spotted throughout the canyon—other paladins following his lead, providing some light in the darkness.

Karazickle let out a fierce roar, loud enough to cause human ears to ring uncomfortably. “Your kind will pay for the destruction you have caused draconem kind!” he snarled while soaring down toward a large group of knights and paladins.

The draconem flew down past Zalphium and Franch, toward the centre pit where most humans stood. Karazickle built up enough wind that the horse wobbled and tripped over its own legs, throwing the two paladins into the air.

Zalphium fell, colliding into the snow head-first, still holding tightly onto his sword. He got himself up and glanced around at the scene to see Franch had landed on his knees and was able to regain balance quickly. The horse was not so lucky and remained motionless on his side.

Near the centre pit, Karazickle extended his hind legs and landed with a heavy thud into the snow, colliding with several dozen humans in the process. His force crushed them instantly on impact, splattering their blood across his sharp claws and spraying red-stained snow into the air.

Through the mist of snow and blood, the knights began to charge at the draconem, projecting their spears into the air in hopes of penetrating his scales. The closer ones lashed their swords at the draconem. Regardless of their method, the steel weaponry only rebounded off his rock-hard scales.

The paladins nearby began to chant to themselves, clutching the pendants around their necks, performing Prayers of Power. Before they could finish their words, the blizzard increased in speed and density. The hailing ice rained down like a volley of arrows, piercing through the armour and flesh of any human it came in contact with.

The thin mountain air was now filled with screams of pain as men collapsed to the ground with ice shards puncturing their heads, limbs, and chests. They fell in rapid numbers, staining the snow with their blood.

Zalphium's eyes widened as he unbuckled his shield and placed it over his head.

Franch rushed over to him, taking shelter under the shield. "I'll cast a protection Prayer of Power! May God guard and protect our senses. So that this misfor—" Before he could finish his sentence, an ice shard pierced through the shield and punctured right through his skull, splitting it in two. Blood and brain matter splashed across Zalphium's face and the glowing light from Franch's body dimmed to nothing, leaving him in darkness.

"Franch!" he shouted. His mind raced, trying to figure out what to do next. He did not know enough Prayers of Power to shield himself, and the shards of ice were shredding through the knights and paladins at an incredible rate.

He glanced up to see Karazickle was lashing his giant claws at oncoming paladins. Some of the golden-plated men glowed blue—a sign that they had activated a protection Prayer of Power. The ice shards that hit them shattered on impact, leaving no sign of damage on them or their armour. Other paladins that were unable to perform the protection Prayer of Power followed the fate of the Knight's Union and were pierced repeatedly by the ice shards.

Karazickle's tail swung violently, throwing the few remaining men behind him in the air.

An ice shard pierced through Zalphium's shield, ramming into his ankle before he could make any sort of decision. The sudden penetration caused him to yelp in pain as a body, sent flying by Karazickle's tail, collided directly with him. The blow sent him into the air, skidding across the snow until his head slammed directly into a rock. The body that hit him remained on top of him, covering his wounded leg.

Zalphium grunted, trying to shift the body off him before he was penetrated with an ice shard. *This is it, he thought. I am about to meet the Father. I have failed.*

Before his fears were proven true, the ice shards stopped falling from the sky and the clouds began to dissipate, leaving only the clear, starry sky in front of him.

A part of Zalphium wanted to get up, but he was too dazed by the impact with the rock to focus. His senses were still somewhat intact but he could no longer hear screams, shouts, or shredding flesh. There was only silence.

The moment passed quickly as a deep, colossal roar echoed through the canyon.

Karazickle, Zalphium thought as the whooshing sound of wings filled the air and the breeze from the draconem's take-off fanned his face, leaving him defeated in the snow.