

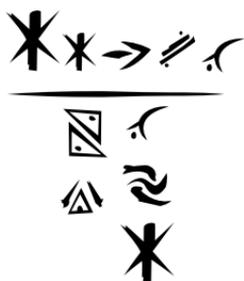
MENTAL DAMNATION
REALITY



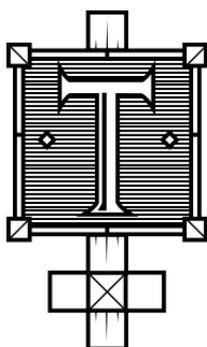
VOL I

KONN LAVERY

CHAPTER I



Soft-Skins



Thick red liquid oozed down the grey, mangy fur of a wolf. The animal lay on its side against a moss-covered tree, eyes glazed over and ears lowered. Flies began to swarm around its body. Each irregular breath it took was followed by a wheezing noise as blood pumped from the torn flesh around its neck. There were bite marks around the animal's throat—clear indicators of an attack by another beast.

Whether the animal had engaged in combat with another wolf, or possibly a larger predator, was not important to the father and daughter who had discovered the dying creature and now stood mere meters from it. No, unfortunately the fate of the wolf had been sealed and now the question remained: What does one do with a dying animal?

“Killing and death are common things, my Krista,” the father said, looking down at his daughter through the slim pupils of his yellow eyes. He got down on one knee, extending his brown, scaly claw to stroke the top of her head, which was covered densely in long, thin,

black and navy feathers. "Both in the animal kingdom and in ours."

"But you always say killing is a wicked deed, Father. So all animals are wicked?" The little girl blinked a couple of times, staring at her father's large, crested head.

"Yes, I did say that. The animal world is different than ours, their intentions less sinister. Killing is a regular part of our lives for the wrong reasons."

"Because of the humans?"

The father nodded, his small nostrils flaring. "Yes. Because of the humans." He got up to his feet and pulled out a dagger that was sheathed in his belt. "Animals understand the natural balance of our world ... unlike those who are deemed 'civilized.' Come now, we must offer this animal mercy."

"How?" the girl asked, following her father as he approached the whimpering wolf. "You're not going to kill the poor thing?" She stopped in her tracks, grabbing hold of the tip of her thin brown tail.

"I must, Krista. There are only a few scenarios when you will find yourself in need of killing."

The wolf's eyes looked over to the approaching reptilian and snarled weakly, exposing its teeth. It didn't even have the strength to lift its head. The wolf's breathing rapidly increased, and it coughed with the effort.

"Either as a favour to end one's suffering..."

The father moved swiftly, dashing on all fours, dagger in hand. His long tail swayed side to side, aiding in his movement. He skidded on his knees before coming to a stop and plunging the dagger up into the animal's skull from the lower jaw. The wolf gurgled once and twitched before the body relaxed and all movements stopped. Blood seeped down the dagger onto the reptilian's hand.

"...or in self-defence." He looked over to his daughter. Some of his scalp-feathers had been displaced by his quick movements and he brushed them back with his free hand. "Remember that."

Krista nodded and stared at the wolf's corpse while her father pulled the knife from its skull. She felt her heart sink, knowing that the animal was now gone forever. Her father was right, but she had a hard time grasping the concept of taking another's life. Removing a living being from the world seemed like too much power. A horrific

act. "Yes, father," she replied.

He stood and wiped the blood off the blade against his knee-length green trousers. "Ideally, save your claws for self-defence. Use a weapon for more accurate execution when ending one's suffering." Pointing at the ground beside Krista, he added, "Pick up the berries. Your mother will need them for dinner."

The little girl's eyes widened. She had completely forgotten about the woven basket filled with berries that they had harvested! She snatched up the basket by its arched handle. The fruits were native to the pine forest: sweet, purple, and covered in lumps.

"Come now." Krista's father extended his hand, and Krista grabbed it.

The two walked slowly past the corpse of the wolf and back onto the rough dirt footpath. "Father, what if I don't want to kill?"

Her father let out a hearty chuckle. "There will come a point in time when you will have to."

"What if I don't kill in self-defence or helping a suffering one?"

"I pray to the spirits you do not have to. However, I will never lie to you." He looked down at her and smiled, tight-lipped.

"Do you think I will have to kill the humans?"

"Humans are a much younger race than us vazeleads, aging quickly and processing the world at a rapid rate. It causes them to think drastically, jumping to conclusions. Thinking at this speed worked as an advantage to defeat the draconem."

"I don't understand why they hate us so much."

"The humans? I don't think it is so much hate as it is fear. Their paranoia turned them into the very thing that they opposed after they ended the Drac Age."

"What's that?"

"Racial oppressors."

Krista frowned. She found it baffling that there were such terrible things in the world; she only wanted everyone to get along. As far as she was concerned, the world had plenty of space for everyone. "I wish we could all live together."

"The humans see us as a threat. They think we are allied with the draconem, hence their paranoia."

"But we're not, are we?"

“No, Krista, not our village. The other villages overseas in Europe? I cannot speak for them. Harmony with the humans is just not an option. We live in a time of bigotry and you need to prepare to fend for yourself.”

“I don’t want to kill, Dad. I want to have peace.”

“As do we all.”

“Killing sounds like the opposite of peace. I won’t be a part of it.”

“Your passion is warming to hear, my dear daughter. There are things at work that are much larger than you or I. Some of the Drac Lords survived at the end of the Drac Age, and the humans are continually looking to hunt them down. Our kind were not meant to be dragged into the dispute between the draconem and the humans. We are simply suffering the consequences for our minor physical resemblance. I can only hope that the spirits will guide us through this.”

“We’re not a threat to them. I wish they could just see that.”

“It’s not so simple, my daughter. Unless you can peel off your scales and pigment your skin to look like theirs, they will remain suspicious of us. They will never accept us as vazeleads.”

Krista and her father continued down the path leading out of thick wilderness. It was a good hike from their home and well worth the journey to gather the berries. The fruit served as a delicious dessert after their dinner. Plus, Krista enjoyed having one-on-one time with her father without her pesky little brother getting in the way. It was a special father-daughter time.

Lately she could tell her father was ill at ease. She couldn’t fully grasp all of the events going on between the humans and her people, or throughout the Kingdom of Zingalg, but she knew her dad. It took a lot to throw him off his typically calm and collected state. Plus, this wasn’t the first time recently they had discussed killing. There was a reason he was lecturing her.

As they passed the last couple of pine trees and moved through some shrubbery the two stood at the top of a grassy hill, looking down at their village, which was about four hundred paces away. The small round wooden huts were aligned in rows all around the town, complete with backyard gardens. Just beyond the town was a river with a footbridge. Stretching from the riverbank were a couple of

docks where the townsfolk would catch fish.

"We truly live in a paradise." The father smiled. "I never tire of exiting Kuzuchi Forest to see our town."

"Zingalg is very pretty," Krista agreed.

Truthfully, she had not explored the continent very much. She was way too young, only about ninety years old. She had a lot of growing up to do before she could venture out on her own. Krista was much better off learning from her elders, as her mother would say.

Oh, no, Krista thought. *Mum*. She swallowed heavily. "Dad...." She spoke softly.

"Yes?"

"Before we left, I completely forgot to grab the clothes off the drying racks. Please don't be mad."

The father shook his head. "Nonsense; it's not a big deal."

"It is to Mum."

"Nitpicky details." He winked at her. "I'll have a word with her."

"Thank you." She smiled.

The two finished hiking down the slope, leaving behind the massive wild forest at the base of a large mountain. Looking back to the trees, Krista could see the steep dark grey rock face behind them: Mount Kuzuchi. Krista had never been beyond Kuzuchi Forest to see what was up the mountain. It remained as mysterious as the low clouds that shrouded its true height.

In no time, the two of them reached the bottom of the grassy hill. The footpath they walked on was now much wider and covered by gravel. Villagers busily walked up and down and across the road, completing their daily tasks while the sun was still shining. Some carried tools, like axes or hammers, while others hauled barrels filled with lumber or grain. A number of villagers were making exchanges with bakers or cooks so they too could return to their homes and prepare for dinner.

"I miss days like this," Krista's father commented. "This was the normal: a self-sustaining community of tradesmen and farmers."

"Yeah." Krista nodded. She knew her father was referring to the increased trading with the blacksmiths of the town for swords and shields, thanks to hushed rumours about the humans. Nowadays, their people spent their days practicing with their new weapons

instead of enjoying time with each other.

The blacksmiths used to only make basic tools for their village. Now, with the new weaponry, high tension was radiating throughout the town. No one was sure what, if anything, the humans were planning to do to their people, where they were, or when. The one thing that was certain was the fear that the unknown created.

Krista's father led them through the crisscrossing roads, moving around pedestrians and back to their home hut. The round dwelling was made of logs and animal hides forming two circular rooms; one was the living quarters and the other was the kitchen and working area.

"Just follow my lead and do not worry about your mother." Krista's father squeezed her hand once more before letting it go and he stepped into their hut, pushing aside the red linen curtains that draped over the front entrance.

"Muluve, we've returned from the harvest," he announced.

Krista followed close behind him, nervously fidgeting with the handle of the basket she held. She never liked upsetting her parents. Her mother got exceptionally displeased when things she asked to be done were not.

Krista picked up on the scent of cooking lentils in the room and eyed the entryway, where her father kept some of his gardening tools on the wooden dining table alongside the stack of unset plates. Next to them was a set of painted wooden blocks that belonged to her brother. The table was multi-purpose – or, as her mum would say, a mess.

The dirt floor had several thick black rugs over it to help soften the space. Wooden shelves were carved against the curved walls. Beads hung from the ceiling just by the kitchen counter, helping to divide the entrance from the cooking area.

Muluve stood on the other side of the counter, hands on her hips, a wooden cooking spoon in hand. Her face, the hue of sandstone, was etched in a scowl. Her blue scalp-feathers were messy and some draped over her green eyes as she stared at her husband and daughter.

"Kristolantice Scalebane." Muluve spoke in a stern voice. "Where have you been?"

Krista swallowed; her mum only ever used her full name when she

was mad at her. *This isn't good.*

"She's been harvesting berries and learning about the challenges of life," Krista's father said with a smile, leaning down and grabbing the basket from Krista.

"Yes, I know, Scalius. She was not supposed to leave until all her chores were done..." She looked down at Krista. "...and she knew that."

Krista looked away while putting her hands behind her back. "Sorry."

"She can take care of them now while dinner is cooking." Scalius stepped over to his wife, placing the basket on the counter. He gave her a quick lick across the cheek with his thin black tongue before stepping towards the doorway leading to the next room. "I'll be reading while she does."

"Wait." Muluve gently grabbed her husband's arm and he paused in his steps. "We need to talk." She looked over to Krista. "Dear, can you watch the lentils for me?"

"Why can't Salanth do it?"

"Your brother is out back taking care of the chores you left behind."

Krista frowned. *I swear that little brat is the favourite.* "Yes, Mum."

Muluve left the wooden spoon on the counter and followed Scalius into the extended room through the doorway, divided by another red linen curtain. Their lowered, muffled voices could just barely be heard from the kitchen.

Krista moved past the counter, grabbing the spoon as she went. She stepped closer to where she could see the stone stovetop with the pot of lentils boiling over the small fire. The doorway beside it was curtainless and opened into the backyard where her brother was presumed to be. She caught notice of a wooden footstool beside the counter. She had to use it anytime her mother needed her to help in the kitchen. Krista hated having to rely on it. If she were taller like her father, then she wouldn't have to carry the footstool around like a crutch.

When I'm older, things will change, she thought while dragging the footstool beside the stovetop and stepping onto it. *Then I can do what I want, and reach what I want without help.*

Krista began stirring the pot of green lentils, moving the spoon

clockwise. Some of the bubbles in the pot dissipated, and she was careful to avoid the steam. *Learn one task at a time.* She was decent at cooking thanks to her mum, but she could always learn more.

Krista's eyes widened as she heard her mother exclaim the word, "What?"

Scalius hushed her and spoke a sentence too low for Krista to pick up.

What is so important that they are whispering? Krista thought. Curiosity got the best of her and she got off her footstool. *When I am older, there also won't be all these secrets.*

Krista carefully crept closer to the doorway leading into the living quarters and leaned her earhole as close as she could to the red linen fabric without brushing up against it. A small sliver between the wooden doorway and the cloth allowed her to see her parents on the other end of the room. Muluve had her arms folded, one hand stroking her neck. Scalius held her arms with both hands.

It was difficult to hear over the fire and boiling water, but Krista focused intently as her father spoke.

"...Like I said, the Council of Just have sent the Paladins of Zeal and the Knight's Union to round up other villages."

"That is why our people are making weapons?"

"Yes. A few of the people know, and the rest are following out of fear."

"What are the humans doing with the other villages?"

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"We need to get out of here, then. Why are we still here?"

"Not so quickly, my love. It would be foolish to get up and run. We are as safe as possible here by the base of Mount Kuzuchi. No one comes here."

Muluve exhaled through her nostrils, her tail coiling around her ankle. "I don't like sitting here."

"Packing and running has no benefit to us either. The Council of Just brought the world out of the Drac Age and the Kingdom of Zingalg will listen to them without question. This whole land is a human dictatorship."

"What if we set sail? Leave Zingalg and head for Europe or the seas in the northern west? They remain unknown."

“How could we sneak across this continent? The mountain is too high to hike across, and anywhere else there’s too much land to cover. We’d be on the run for months.”

Muluve nodded. “It leaves me ill at ease to remain here, simply waiting.”

Scalius stroked her scalp-feathers and nodded. “Me too, but for the good of our children, keeping a low profile is our best chance of survival.”

“How can you be certain the other tribes are being taken?” Muluve asked.

“Some of the other villagers and I caught notice during our hunts. We witnessed with our own eyes the knights and paladins herding our kind. They had them shackled, bruised and bleeding, like cattle. They were too far from our village to be our own; the humans had to be raiding the other villages.”

“Impossible! I thought the humans were past the use of slavery?”

“They claim to be, since the end of the Drac Age, but who knows. Those dogmatists lack any sort of reasoning beyond saving their own skin.”

“So what are they doing with our people?”

“I don’t know.”

The two stood in silence, both staring at the ground.

Krista swallowed heavily. It was a lot of information to take in. *What does that all mean for my family?*

Muluve spoke, breaking the silence. “I need to check on dinner.”

“Of course,” Scalius replied before grabbing hold of her, embracing his wife with a kiss, tongues coiling for several moments before letting go.

Uh-oh, Krista thought while Muluve marched towards the doorway. She scurried away from her hiding spot and rushed over to the stove. Quickly she got up onto the footstool and placed the wooden spoon into the pot and began to stir again. Some of the lentils were now stuck to the bottom of the pot from the lack of motion.

Oops! she thought.

“Thank you, my dear,” Muluve said behind her. Her claws gently grabbed the spoon from Krista’s hand and she began to stir. Her mother’s stirring stopped and she pressed the spoon against the

bottom of the pot, pushing several times before stirring again. She knew the lentils were sticking.

Krista stepped down and scratched her head. Normally her mother would have commented about Krista's mistake – this was out of character. *Mum and Dad are both not normal right now.*

“Kristalantice, can you please cut some of the potatoes? I washed them but I haven't had the chance to slice them.” Muluve pointed at the counter dividing the kitchen from the entryway.

“Sure.” Krista hadn't even noticed the potatoes earlier. *I probably didn't see them because I am too small.* She walked over to the counter, dragging her footstool with her, placing it on the ground and stepping onto it. Moments later, she heard footsteps stomping behind her.

Glancing over, she spotted her little brother dashing through the back entrance and around the kitchen, screaming in joy. He rushed past the counter and into the entryway where he plopped himself on a stool beside the dining table, resting his arms on the surface. He grabbed hold of a couple of his wooden blocks and began fidgeting with them.

“Salanth, you finished folding the laundry into the basket?” Muluve asked.

The little boy nodded and smiled at his mum. He didn't use words yet. He was much younger than Krista; his scalp-feathers hadn't even grown in yet. Salanth was easily amused by stacking blocks and running around squealing.

Give him a few decades and he will be fluent in speaking. Krista remembered some of her earlier childhood memories before Salanth was born; she'd never been as hyperactive as he was.

Boys.

Screams erupted from outside the hut and brought everyone to a sudden halt. The sound of clanging metal and marching steel boots stomping on the gravel filled the air. Krista was midway through slicing a potato when she glanced over at her mother, whose eyes were wide open.

“Krista, grab your broth—”

Before Muluve could finish her sentence, three humans dressed head to toe in silver armour barged into the room through the front entrance. Their deep red capes swayed as they rushed into the small

kitchen – the Knight’s Union.

Krista dropped her knife, watching as one of them swiftly grabbed her little brother by the head. He was small enough that a hand could easily grasp his entire skull.

“Humans!” Muluve hissed. “Give back my son!” She snatched up a large butcher knife from the counter and began to dash towards her child’s abductors.

Before she could make it around the counter beside Krista, another knight appeared from the back entrance.

“Mum!” Krista shouted. Everything was moving too fast for her to comprehend.

Krista gasped as the man caught Muluve’s knife-wielding hand in midair. He yanked hard, turning her around. The human struck her in the muzzle with the blunt end of his broadsword, shattering her bones on impact. Muluve dropped the knife and fell limply to the ground, knocked out cold as black blood began to seep from her face.

Scalius burst into the room, pushing the red curtains from his view. He quickly scanned the scenario: his son held by a human, his wife on the ground bleeding, and his daughter fear-struck. He let out a deep roar, neck vibrating as the sound burst from the depths of his throat.

“You’ve made a grave mistake, you arrogant soft-skins!” Scalius charged on all fours towards the three men who stood in the entry. He leaped into the air, front claws forward, snarling. Before the knights had a chance to react, he tackled the one to the far right, his claws lunging into the steel plating of the man’s helmet. Blood splattered from the open wounds like juice, as if he were puncturing a fruit.

He pulled his claws from the corpse while lashing his tail at the other men. The sound made a crackling noise, prompting the men to step backwards.

The knight who had entered from the back rushed over to aid his comrades, leaving Krista alone with Muluve. She got off the stool and lay down beside her mother, pressing her forehead against hers. “Mum!” she cried, shaking her head with both hands. Muluve did not respond. “Mum!” Krista repeated.

At the cries of another man, Krista glanced up. Her father had sliced open another knight’s throat, and red liquid sprayed wildly in all directions from the wound. He did a quick spin, avoiding the

back-entrance knight's sword thrust. Scalius finished his motion by slashing downward with his claws onto the knight holding Salanth.

The attack shredded the knight's armour from head to waist, ripping through his eye, lips, and chest. The assault caused the man to drop Salanth and the little boy scurried away.

All the ruckus caught the attention of more humans, who rushed into the hut. It was hard for Krista to count how many there were, but the new swarm of beings blocked her little brother from making a clean escape towards the kitchen.

I have to do something! she thought, still holding her mother while glancing around. What could she do? She got up and grabbed her footstool. There had to be a bigger knife somewhere – the potato-peeling knife was too small and flimsy.

There are only a few scenarios when you will find yourself in need of killing ... in self-defence. Her father's words replayed in her mind.

She slid the stool over to the stove where they kept a drawer of cooking tools and eating utensils – she knew her mother stored the knives in there. Her claws were nowhere near as sharp as her father's yet; she was far too young. Besides, he'd told her to rely on them only for defense.

The new attackers charged Scalius with their swords drawn. Krista's father lashed his tail at one of the men's ankles, coiling it around his leg. Scalius pulled on the man's limb, knocking him to the floor, causing a heavy thud. The other men were too close to avoid and one knight thrust his blade, piercing it into Scalius's stomach. The third man swung his sword at Scalius's neck but the reptilian managed to grab the knight's arm in midair. The second knight pulled his blade from Scalius's gut and prepared to thrust again. Krista's father kicked the man in the chest, sending him stumbling backward.

The first knight got up off the ground and rushed at Scalius with his sword in the air, ready to strike. It hacked into his collarbone; he yelped in pain and released his grasp on the third man's arm. The three humans overpowered Scalius with their swords, slicing him from his neck down to his thighs, blood spraying from his body like a fountain.

Krista saw the men move away from her father's bleeding form and back towards her mother – way too close to Krista. One of the

humans stepped forward, grabbing Muluve, still unconscious, by the scalp-feathers, dragging her back by the dining table.

Krista ducked to make herself as small as possible; she was still high enough to see the scene, and still scrambling through the drawer. *Fork ... butter knife ... no!*

Lifting Muluve's head up, the knight raised his cold steel blade to her throat and carved into her scaled skin. The sound of flesh, then bone, and flesh again resounded in the kitchen with each slice into her neck.

Krista's brother screamed and tried to run from the dining table, past the distracted men and towards Krista. A man cut the toddler's sprint short with a swift kick to the side of his head. Salanth was thrown into the air and collided with the base of a shelf. The impact of the human's steel boot against the child's face left the man with a bloody footprint and the boy limp on the ground.

Krista reacted in horror. *This has to be a bad dream.*

She slipped off the stool and onto the ground. The humans hadn't seen her yet, but she realized that she would be next. The men were now inspecting their dead comrades. It was only a matter of time before they noticed her.

Just then, she heard a voice hiss out. "Over here!"

Glancing towards the sound, Krista saw a boy – one of her people, not much older than she – standing at the back doorway of the kitchen leading to the backyard.

"Quickly, before it is too late!" he urged.

She didn't know whether it was a blessing or dumb luck that this mysterious boy had found her, but it didn't matter. Her survival instincts kicked in and Krista ran outside to join him. Looking back, Krista could see the men still bent over their fallen allies and examining the room.

The boy reached out for her hand, and Krista grabbed it. "They won't notice us. We are safe," he said.

The two ran beyond the backyard. The Scalebane family's garden was small, but somehow they'd always had enough to eat. Krista and the boy sprinted into the alley as fast as they could. The dirt track between rows of huts stretched on for blocks. The village was filled with the sound of screams, metal clanging, and the splintering of

wood. Smoke rose from the flames that consumed some of the nearby huts.

In that moment, Krista clued in: she had left her family to die. “My family, they’re...” She wept. *I shouldn’t have left them.*

“Mine is, too,” the boy replied. “I lived a couple huts down from your own. The humans came for us and I ran out of there as quickly as I could. I heard screams from your hut and saw you on the stool from the back entrance. I’m lucky I found you when I did.”

“Thank you.” Krista wiped the tears from her eyes and studied him, noticing his long scalp-feathers that went down past the base of his neck. He wore a simple grey tunic that draped over one shoulder, leaving the other bare. “What’s your name?” She found it odd that he’d lived so close but she had never seen him before.

“Darkwing Lashback. You?”

“Krista Scalebane. Kristalantice.”

“Wish we met under better circumsta—” Darkwing stopped mid-sentence as he stared into the distance. Krista followed his gaze: the alley’s exit, only about four huts down, was blocked by five men in gold plating, marching towards them armed with maces and spears.

“Paladins! Back this way!” Darkwing spun around, pulling her along.

But the path behind them was now blocked by two knights wielding bloodstained swords. The men from Krista’s home had somehow followed them.

Krista felt her heart sink. “What do we do?” she asked.

Releasing her hand, Darkwing raised his arms in the air. “Put yours up, too. Let them take us.”

“But we have to defend ourselves! That’s the only time to fight,” Krista said, thinking of her father’s words.

“Notice what happened to our families when they did?”

Krista felt her stomach turn inside out. Her new friend wasn’t wrong, but that didn’t mean she liked the fact that she had to step down. Her father said killing was needed in self-defence. *Darkwing is right, though. They’re too strong and there are too many of them.*

Obedying, Krista raised her hands and accepted defeat with tears running down her face. The two knights sheathed their swords, approaching Krista and Darkwing. She could pick up the scent of the

humans; their stench was much stronger than that of her own kind, probably due to all the hair they had.

The men pulled steel chain cuffs from their belts and cuffed Krista and Darkwing at the wrists, locking them together. Krista looked down the alleyway to see the five golden-armoured men continue down the streets away from them. The two knights escorted them out of the alley and down the road, where Krista saw more humans prodding small herds of her people from the village with their spears, swords, and whips.

Some of the humans rode warhorses that were draped in the same deep red fabric as their capes, completed with a white lion emblem on the side – the iconic symbol of the Kingdom of Zingalg. Krista could see the horrified faces of her neighbours as they passed by several groups. She and Darkwing exchanged looks, despair written on their faces.

Along with the rest of the town's survivors, Krista and Darkwing were brought to the centre of their village to watch it be desecrated. Hours passed before the humans ceased their raiding, plundering goods from the town and capturing the remaining villagers that did not resist arrest. Krista stood next to Darkwing, looking to the ground. She didn't see much of a point in watching her town being annihilated. It was all happening too fast for her to comprehend. Why were the humans here now?

"What are they going to do with us?" she asked, turning to Darkwing.

He shook his head. "I don't know for sure."

An older villager beside them raised his claws, his chains jingling as he did. "I heard them saying something about a mountain." Some of his dry, old scales flaked off as he spoke.

"A mountain?" She glanced up beyond Kuzuchi Forest to the mountain. Its stone slopes went so high that they vanished beyond the clouds.

Darkwing exhaled. "What could they possibly do with us there?"

The elderly reptilian pointed to the mountain, his beaded grey scalp-feathers dangling from his head. Some of them grew along his neck and jaw, forming a mane. "Mount Kuzuchi is said to be the gateway to the underworld. It is the only notable aspect of the mountain, besides

being the tallest peak of the charted world.”

“Underworld?” Krista asked.

Darkwing folded his arms. “It’s supposedly a landscape beneath the surface. Basically a giant cavern larger than the Kingdom of Zingalg.”

“Why would they be herding us there?”

The elder sighed. “The humans claim they are not like their draconem adversaries who believe in annihilation of species. They also no longer practice slavery. Perhaps they are banishing our kind.”

“Banishment?” Darkwing squinted. “To the underworld? But it’s dark, with harsh living conditions. I’ve heard stories that it ... changes people ... into fiends. No one has made it out of there once entering.”

The elder’s face was grim as his saggy eyes stared into Darkwing’s. “We just might find out what that all means.”

Krista fidgeted with her fingers. She felt beyond lost. Her family was gone. The elder and Darkwing spoke of things she was unfamiliar with. Perhaps her dad would have explained it all to her when she was older. But right now she was just grasping how to forage for berries and learning basic household chores. *Everything is moving too fast. Dad was patient with me so I could learn.* Her heart was struck with another heavy hit of pain. It was still difficult to accept that he was no longer here, not to mention her mother and brother.

A trotting mustard-coloured warhorse caught Krista’s attention. The large animal’s muscular white legs stomped by Krista and her new allies. “Rally the vazeleads, troops!” a bearded man shouted from his perch on the horse.

Krista glanced around at what she could see of her town. The streets were littered with corpses of her people, huts burning as the silver- and gold-armoured humans dragged a few remaining villagers over to the town center.

The bearded man blew a white horn that was held by a leather strap across his shoulder. The sound was deep, loud, and echoed for miles around. Once he finished, he licked his lips and shouted, “It is time to march for Mount Kuzuchi, where Lord Saule awaits us!”

The crack of a whip pierced the air from behind, causing the herd of villagers – vazeleads – to move. Krista was pushed forward by the tide of villagers behind her as more whips snapped, forcing them to pick up their pace. She was glad she was chained to Darkwing, considering

the circumstances. *My mum said safety in numbers....* The thought of her mother was too much to bear and she burst into tears.

Darkwing kept his arm around her as they walked, letting her sob on his shoulder.

As they reached the outskirts of the village, Krista looked back one last time. The entire village was being set on fire by some remaining knights on horseback, torching the structures as they rode by. Corpses of her people were piled up at the sides of the dirt roads and set ablaze. The sickening realization hit her in the core of her gut – she'd never see her home or family again.

The humans persisted with forceful speed, herding her people away from the village towards Mount Kuzuchi. They took the fork in the road to the left leading up the larger path towards the mountain, away from the foothills. It was still covered in gravel, much like the roads in the village. But this road was wider, allowing for more rows of travellers to move at once. It went along the grass, away from Kuzuchi Forest, with a gradual incline. The sound of hundreds of footsteps from the humans, horses, and vazeleads filled the air. Whips, cries, and hisses also rose over the background noise. Krista's mind kept replaying her family's death, drowning out the harsh sounds around her.

Darkwing still held her under his arm as best as he could while chained. He pushed on her slightly to help her keep up with the pace that the humans set. Hours went by before they had their first rest. Krista's legs were sore and shaking from the day's mix of adrenaline, hunger, and exhaustion.

Some of her people had collapsed on the road, still being whipped by the humans. Neighbours would try and help the fallen up, only to be greeted by a steel boot from the knights, forcing them to leave the weak behind to be trampled by hooves and feet.

Even the one rest they had was not adequate; on average, the humans took only three to four hours of rest and then spent entire days and evenings walking. Krista noticed that the farther they travelled up Mount Kuzuchi, the scarcer the trees were and the rockier the terrain got. The road they hiked sloped upward in a zigzag fashion, so high it disappeared from view into the clouds. Other raiding parties that had collected vazeleads from neighbouring villages met their party at a

major crossroad along the way that split into four other paths. These other groups ranged from half the size of her village to double.

My dad was right - they are taking all of our people, Krista thought, recalling the conversation she'd overheard between her father and mother. *If only we had left, like Mum said*. Krista tried not to play the "what if" game, but at a time as dreadful as this, it was hard not to. What else was her mind supposed to do?

The various groups of humans and their captives merged into a single unit and moved up the switchbacks of the mountain road. Krista felt overwhelmed by the sea of bodies and the unfamiliar vazeleads brushing up against her; their smells, their touch, and the sheer numbers made her squeamish. Most of the captives were covered in dirt and had poor hygiene; others were wounded and carried infections. Once again, she felt grateful for having Darkwing beside her. The thought of trying to manoeuvre through this chaos on her own was unbearable.

Through the swarms of her people, Krista and Darkwing lost sight of the elderly villager they had been chatting to; it was possible he was one of the unfortunate ones to have collapsed on the road.

Keep moving, she thought.

Over several long and hard days of travel, the paladins and knights led the vazeleads higher up Mount Kuzuchi. The walk became steeper the higher up the mountain they went. More of the elderly and wounded reptilians struggled up the path, and family and friends helped them along so the humans would not bother them with their whips and boots.

Questions were whispered amongst the vazeleads: Why were they going up the mountain? What was this rumoured underworld? And why were the humans taking them to its entrance?

The air grew colder and thinner as they climbed beyond the thick sheet of clouds. The path was soon covered in a blanket of snow. Krista did her best to ease her breathing to adapt to the lack of oxygen. She could see the dark night sky sprinkled with stormy clouds looming ever closer as they neared the mountaintop.

The road grew steeper as they approached the peak of the mountain, and the rocks along the side of the road rose higher, forming a hallway leading to the summit. The sound of beautiful voices chanting echoed

through the hall.

“What is that?” Krista looked up at Darkwing.

“Supposedly Mount Kuzuchi reaches so high that we are near the Heavens, so you can hear the angels sing.”

“My father said angels and the Heavens were a myth made by the humans. The spirits around us are living proof.”

“I’m not too sure if either of those are fully truthful.”

The soothing music of the angels was at odds with Krista’s feelings: She felt trapped by the high walls around her, with nowhere to go except forward. Yet the chanting voices were soothing and calming. She experienced a bizarre mixture of emotions she had never felt before. The conflicting sensations made her more aware of her heart’s rapid beating and the tension in her body.

“Are they taking us to the underworld entrance?” Krista whispered to Darkwing.

“I don’t know; guess we’re going to find out,” he replied.

The large mass of beings gradually neared the end of the long hall. The ground evened out to a flat plane; snow covered the rocks and large, spikey boulders formed a wall around the summit. Looking up, Krista realized they were at the bottom of a canyon, and their road in was the only way in or out. The rock walls were at least four times the height of any of her people, and far too steep to climb. In the mountaintop’s centre, taking up a third of the total area, was a massive black pit. More imprisoned vazeleads and armoured men, some plated in steel, others in gold, stood around the hole. Torches were mounted on poles placed around the canyon, casting a dim orange light on the scene.

At the far right corner of the canyon, a group of paladins pressed their hands together and stood in a row. Bright translucent lights in series of connecting chains channelled from their hands and draped down to the ground. The glowing chains ran beyond the group and all along the rim of the center pit.

Atop a large rock opposite where Krista’s group had entered stood a man in golden armour wearing a deep red kilt, black hair blowing in the wind. “Rally them to the centre!” he barked. Despite the distance, his voice boomed throughout the canyon, drowning out the chanting angels.

The bearded man who led their group trotted on his horse. "You heard Lord Saule! Move the reptiles!"

The humans became more aggressive, lashing hard at the vazeleads with their whips. Those that carried spears began to poke at their captives, piercing their scales. Krista and Darkwing were jostled by the wave of reptilian bodies trying to avoid the humans. They were near the edge of the mass of prisoners, but far enough in that the stragglers could knock them around.

"At long last, their time has come. The vazeleads will suffer their final punishment for their loyalties to the Drac Lords!" the kilted man identified as Lord Saule roared from his perch on the boulder.

An elbow from behind thrust into Krista's head and she stumbled down into the snow.

"Come on!" Darkwing pulled on the chain, helping her up.

She scurried to her feet. "What do we do?" Krista asked.

A man appeared at Krista's side and thrust his spear. "Move!"

She managed to step backward in time to avoid the attack, but the man continued to advance. She screamed and stepped behind Darkwing, hoping he would protect her.

The vazeleads and humans began to blend together in the outer circle of the crowd, making it difficult for Krista to tell which way the entrance road was. Caught in the mass of panicked reptilians, Krista found herself being pushed along with the current toward the centre of the mountain, toward the black pit.

Krista could hear her people scream as they were forced into the pit, stepping beyond the glowing chains channelled by the paladins and falling into its unknown depths. The chains unnaturally duplicated while latching onto any descending vazeleads, binding them by their ankles. She could not see them fall farther into the hole; it was impossible for her to see anything more than a couple feet away. The prisoners around her were pushing and shoving, trying to avoid the humans.

She looked for a way out but saw that groups of her people that tried to run were handicapped by their chains and unable to get far. The knights and paladins stabbed them and trampled their bodies, pushing forward.

"Darkwing!" Krista cried. She wasn't sure he heard her over the

commotion and the angels' song from the sky.

At that moment a strident voice boomed through all the noise, so devastating it silenced the angels. "Karazickle! Drac Lord of the night!"

As one, the humans and vazeleads halted and the struggle came to a pause. The hundreds of beings atop Mount Kuzuchi stood motionless, trying to see where such a powerful voice had originated. Krista tilted her head while stepping towards the roadway they'd come in on. Her metal chain jingled, pulling Darkwing and forcing him to follow her.

Through a slit between several rows of humans and vazeleads, Krista spotted a man with dirty blond hair on horseback. He wiped his face, hand gliding over his chiselled jaw before speaking again. "Brothers!" he said, holding a large scroll in his hand. "Saule is a fraud! He lied to us! He is the Drac Lord Karazickle!"

"This is absurd!" Lord Saule howled.

Darkwing leaned over to Krista. "No idea what's happening, but it's our chance." He nodded his head to the entrance. "Come. Don't make a scene, though."

Krista caught what he wanted to do - he wanted to get out of there. "Okay," she whispered.

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

Before Krista and Darkwing could creep towards the exit, the humans began pushing the vazeleads back into the centre of the summit. She spotted the man, Zalphium, frantically unrolling the scroll as two knights approached him, swords drawn.

"Move!" a silver-armoured man growled at Krista, lunging his spear.

She screamed and jumped toward Darkwing, and the two were once again being forced closer to the black hole.

Zalphium's voice boomed again. "Brothers, we have all learned to recognize the symbols on this scroll! Behold - a formula of transmogrification, found in Saule's chamber!"

"He's right!" another man shouted, the voice's source originating near Zalphium.

The edge of the pit got closer and closer as Darkwing and Krista were pushed towards it. The humans thrust their weapons at the frightened vazeleads, and Krista got knocked in the head by one of

her own people.

“Ouch!” she shouted, stumbling forward towards the pit. It was difficult to hear her own voice, let alone anyone else’s with all the screaming. She felt her heart race and began to scan her surroundings rapidly, looking for a way out of the writhing sea of prisoners. It was impossible to do anything while still chained to Darkwing, who was also being shoved along with the crowd. Krista looked ahead towards the pit, now only several footsteps away. The diameter of it seemed immeasurable and only blackness was visible inside the hole. Her jaw dropped; her people were tumbling over the snowy rim of the pit like gravel in a landslide, simultaneously being bound at the ankles by the paladins’ glowing chains.

Chaotic laughter began to echo throughout the scene from atop the large rock that Saule stood on. He was waving his hands in front of him in strange motions. His movements became more intense as a wind picked up and dark clouds began to gather and swirl above, covering the sky.

With no further warning, Saule’s body twisted and turned with unnatural liveliness as his shape grew. His armour tore to shreds as his bones began to crack. His head was lifted into the sky by a continually growing spinal cord. His skin ruptured into scales and his fingernails extended into claws.

The humans did not stop their rallying immediately; they were too caught up in their task and continued to push the vazeleads towards the hole. Krista now teetered on the pit’s edge, her feet stepping directly through the chains of light that surrounded the rim like they were made of thin air. The chains began to animate and their links snapped apart, wrapping themselves around her ankles before fusing together again. She felt a warm tingle radiate from the chains.

What? She knew paladins held supernatural powers supposedly granted by their god, but she had no idea what this was. It didn’t matter, though. Right now, it was either be killed by the humans, or embrace wherever the black pit took her.

The choice was made for her when a vazelead to her side backed up, dodging a man’s spear. The impact knocked Krista over the ledge and into the blackness. Her cuffed arms yanked on the metal chain, dragging Darkwing in with her.

She yelped from the sudden pain of pulling all of the boy's weight against her own. The translucent glowing chains around her ankles began to dissolve until they were no longer visible.

The farther Krista fell into the dark pit, the smaller the entrance hole appeared until it became so small there was only blackness all round - and she was still falling. The screams and shouting from atop Mount Kuzuchi had been replaced with the whooshing sound of her weight descending. Pure darkness surrounded her as she reached terminal velocity. She could not see Darkwing above her; the chain seemed to disappear into lightless space, leaving her alone as she fell - down, down, down.