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# CHAPTER 1

## Everything is a Lie

“Everything is a lie ...” – Santos Didymas, Sage of Shangala

**O**ur tale begins not with an opening crawl of bright words on dark background followed by epic orchestral fanfare. Neither is there an introduction by a beautiful enchantress with a melodious voice over fairy tale music accompaniment. We have no wizened wizard’s gravelly voice to set the tone for a most unusual adventure. And we refuse to use that morose monotone to recite another moronic monologue describing a post-apocalyptic world. We’re left with either a poor emulation of Homer’s invocation of the Muses, or a shameless plagiarism of Dickensian rhetoric, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” neither very palatable to the modern reader. We therefore decide to launch directly into the crux and climax of the unlikely, unfortunate, and unfathomable events that befell upon one teenage girl by the name of Victoria Solana.

The saga began or rather came to an end with the tinkle, tankle, and the tintinnabulation of clanking steel. It woke Victoria from her dark dreams. She was greeted by a headache of biblical proportions. She felt as if all her bones had become disjointed. A scorching fire raged underneath her skin. The sweet smell of burnt flesh filled the air. During that momentary state of confusion when one was jolted out of deep sleep, she noticed that something had

gone terribly wrong. The first sentence that came through her clenched teeth was, “Where is my unicorn?”

Victoria Solana was the most normal and ordinary girl you could ever know. She had lived in a typical suburban neighborhood in Toronto all her life. As an only child, she was doted upon by her wonderful but undistinguished parents. Shortly before this tale began, Victoria had just completed a blissfully happy and perfectly uneventful childhood. It was her thirteenth birthday. Her only adventures in her non-adventurous life up until now had been her recent visit to the Bethune House Memorial at Gravenhurst, Muskoka, and the exhilarating expectation of getting braces for her pearly white teeth, the perceived imperfections of which, by any and all standards of observation, could only be described as imperceptible. But she must have braces because her BFFs were having them.

Victoria had three faint freckle-like moles on her face. One was high on her left cheek where beauty moles were usually located. Another one was near the left corner of her lip, which was supposed to signify she would be a connoisseur of fine cuisine. The last one was right at the center of her chin below her lips, which, by the mystical science of molesophy, meant that she was a loving and considerate person.

Victoria shared many interests with her mommy, such as arts and craft, cooking, singing, and meticulously grooming herself. She had a close relationship with her daddy as well and shared some of his interests in science, classical music, board games, and spectator sports. While her daddy loved to watch soccer, Victoria was much more of a baseball fan.

Victoria was an avid fan of the *Amazing Randi* and *Penn & Teller*. She watched most of their shows—those rated PG-13—and read many of their books. She taught herself how to do some of their tricks and learned the lesson never to believe in magic.

Naturally, Victoria became adept in prestidigitation and misdirection, and she would always have a few tricks up her sleeve. She also had an inexplicable fascination in stargazing. For that, her daddy bought her a telescope and spent many happy evenings with her peering at the constellations in the sky.

Although Victoria's parents encouraged her to read the holy books of various creeds to seek her own faith, they generally expressed an informed non-dogmatic mixture of atheist and agnostic views. They called themselves God-free—they were free of the gods, but they were not godless. Hence, Victoria followed her parents on the so-called non-intrusive humanist path simply described as 'Live and Let Live.'

For reasons unknown to Victoria and it was never explained to her satisfaction, her parents did not allow her to partake in any sports, physical games, or competitions. It was as if her parents were afraid that she would draw too much attention. They simply hated to be in the limelight.

Despite living a sedentary lifestyle all her life, Victoria was amazingly healthy. She could not remember ever having visited a doctor or a dentist. In fact, she didn't even remember the last time she took cough medicine or used a Band-Aid. Victoria had been extremely lucky. Life had been all too harmlessly and graciously Canadian for Victoria, and Victoria was as Canadian a Canadian could ever be, ranking way up there with the beaver, Canada goose, maple syrup, ice hockey, and saying sorry when someone steps on your toe.

But without warning and in the blink of an eye, Victoria's life was turned upside down and inside out. She lost everyone in her family and everything she held dear. She could no longer be sure who she was. Her past life became a puff of smoke, suspended precariously in the air, to be dispersed into nothingness with a wave of the hand. By and large, she was like an ant on a Möbius

strip, at a loss even as to which dimension she belonged to. Victoria was lucky to still have her two best friends, but she would soon be separated from them by a continent and an ocean.

Never having traveled beyond Muskoka, about an hour and a half's drive from home, Victoria ended up half way across the world in a strange land, trying to survive among people who spoke a foreign language. Meanwhile, she had to evade sinister assassins who were stalking her every step of the way, cheated death in a fiery car accident on the highway, and stared down the barrel of a pistol aimed point blank at her face. She jumped off a plane mid-flight without a parachute, was in a high-speed car chase on one of the world's longest sea bridges, and was trapped inside the car when it plunged into the sea. She dangled from the window at the top of the tallest building in China, wrestled with a hungry tiger, and killed three grown men using only one arm. All this happened to Victoria Solana because, without being aware of it herself, she held one of the greatest secrets of the universe.

“Stop exaggerating,” groaned Victoria as she struggled to get up, “just tell the story the way it happened, please.”

Dear Lord! This has never happened in the history of storytelling. The heroine of this tale has just made a direct request for how her story should be told. Given that she is the protagonist, she does have the prerogative. For those readers who may find the pompous and hifalutin lexicon of this literary fabrication discombobulating, it means Victoria Solana is the boss, and we do what the boss says.

So let us begin again, with less poetic license and with minimal embellishments, to describe what happened to Victoria Solana and why she found herself rolling on the ground looking for her unicorn. As we all know, the unicorn is a mythical beast; it has no place in a factual story.

## CHAPTER 9

### Dragon Heart

**T**he people promptly buried the great chief without pomp and circumstance, as befitting a defeated leader of a band on the run. His sons strangled his favorite wolfdog White Fang and buried it along with their father as his companion in the afterlife. Lupa convened the tribal meeting after the burial, and promptly proclaimed Lone Wolf Tuman. White Wolf and North Wolf begrudgingly kept their mouths shut. They knew they were no match for Lone Wolf even if they were healthy. Hence, Lone Wolf received the old Tuman's great bronze spear and the Tuman banner without bloodshed.

For this solemn occasion that would determine the future of the tribe, Lone Wolf put on his eagle mantle, which he had made by attaching eagle feathers to his black shroud. The new Tuman looked majestic as he addressed his adopted tribe.

"I am alive today because of the old Tuman; may his spirit protect us always," said Lone Wolf. "I have promised him that I will lead the tribe, but I cannot accept the title of Tuman for now."

White Wolf and North Wolf were surprised at what they heard, and their eyes brightened up with the hope that the Tuman position might still be up for grabs.

"The title Tuman means the head (头: tou) of 'ten-thousand' (万: wan; old dialect: man). The scorpion sign of the Tuman is an ancient symbol passed to us together with the title from more than a thousand years ago. The Han (汉) Empire in the south, following

the tradition of the previous Qin (秦), Zhou (周), and Shang (商) dynasties, also has adopted the scorpion to mean ‘ten-thousand.’ It is therefore a much-revered symbol.

“As such, I will not be Tuman or carry the Tuman banner until our tribe has ten thousand bows again. In the meantime, I shall be Chief Lone Wolf to you all, and I shall lead the tribe with the help of my two brothers, the Right Chief White Wolf and the Left Chief North Wolf.”

This prompted a wave of murmuring among the tribe members, but most nodded their heads in approval.

“We have to make some immediate decisions,” said the new Chief Lone Wolf. “Modred (冒顿: mao-dun; dialect: mo-du), the murderer of his father, wishes to exterminate us.”

Everyone spit at the mention of the cursed name.

“His soldiers are following our tracks through the mountains at this very moment,” the young chief continued. “They are only slowed down by the threat of an ambush. I suggest that we should keep moving through the woods rather than to descend into the valleys and the plains. In the mountains, we can hide better, and we can ambush our pursuers if the opportunity presents itself.

“The trees are laden with fruits and nuts. We will not go hungry here. The woods are also teeming with deer, reindeer, hares, pheasants, and wild birds; we can hunt them and trap them for food. There are foxes, minks, and sables; we can trade their furs. Our wolfdogs will be happy here. And if we don’t stray too far from the streams, we will eat our fill of spawning sturgeons, northern salmons, burbots, and carps. I will teach you how to catch them with nets.

“There is enough pasture for our horses and our herds. Where the land is flat and suitable, we can grow millet. I have saved up some seeds. Finally, we shall worship the golden *Shanbe*, the heavenly beast with the single horn that has led us through the



woods to safety. Let us pray that it will guide us through the difficult times ahead.”

Lone Wolf had scouted out the area in anticipation of the retreat. He learned that this was the ancestral lands of the Eastern Wolves, where legend said that the golden unicorn known as the *Shanbe* once roamed. Lone Wolf understood how a bit of faith and hope would be good for the tribe’s survival.

“I believe that the Hunnu soldiers will not hound us forever. Modred will soon summon them back for other wars. The Hunnu tribe, once our Wolf brothers, became strong in the seventy black peaks of the *Great Green Mountain* (大青山: da-qing-shan) also known as the *Mountain of the Great Canopy* (阴山: yin-shan; shady mountain). Led by the treacherous father-murderer Modred, they have won a great victory over the Eastern Wolf tribes—the Eastern Wolf tribes are no more.

“Modred has taken an uncountable number of slaves and animals. His tribes are laden with mountains of plunder. The blood of the slain flowed like rivers and the earth turned red. Now that the Hunnu has a taste of gore, gold, and glory, they will never satisfy their bloodlust. Their unquenchable thirst will consume them like a scourge.

“The Hunnu under Modred will soon take their iron hooves to the west and the south. They will enjoy military success. But this will be the beginning of their downfall. This is also the beginning of our rise from the ashes. We must try to find as many survivors and stragglers as possible, and we will join forces. Living in the mountains and the woods means we will not be fighting any territorial wars. The people living in the plains call themselves the Berserkers (貉貉: he-mo). They are fierce fighters who wear the skin of the bruins and charge as if possessed by the animal spirits of old. They will not welcome us.

“In the mountains we will toughen ourselves and our children. We will strengthen our sinews and sharpen our skills. We will stay out of war and bloodshed. We will pay tribute to Modred and make alliance with our dispersed brethren hiding in the mountains, both to the north and to the south. We will use all of our energy to grow, until we are strong and numerous enough to ride out of the mountains without fear. Then I will take up the Tuman’s banner and ride with you. All who agree say aye.”

The whole tribe punched the air with their fists and shouted their approval as one. A few started the familiar wolf howl, the sound of which might have prompted the people of the southern land to call the northern Wolf tribes the Hu (胡; northern barbarian).

“We have had a tiring day, let us rest early tonight,” said Chief Lone Wolf. “I’ll take the first round of sentry duty. We strike camp on first light to move into high ground. This tribal meeting is adjourned in the name of our old Tuman; may his spirit protect us always. Everyone, have a good rest.”

The whole tribe rejoiced in the leadership of their young chief. Everyone went to sleep with empty stomachs but with hearts full of hope. They knew that tomorrow would be another difficult day, and that their survival would depend on wise decisions, hard work, tenacity, suffering, and sacrifice, but they believed that as long as they wholeheartedly followed Chief Lone Wolf’s leadership, the tribe would survive and be strong again.

Lone Wolf found a perfect sentry spot on a grassy knoll that overlooked the camp. He had sent a few responsible young men to cover the periphery in other directions. Lone Wolf brought his favorite wolfdog Phantom to keep him company. As soon as he sat down, he heard a rustling noise. Phantom did not make a big fuss because both he and Lone Wolf knew someone had been tailing them.

“Wolf Star, show your face,” said Lone Wolf. “You really should be resting rather than training for an ambush.”

Wolf Star was kinfolk of the old Tuman’s wife. Her tribe had migrated slowly over hundreds of years from the west, across the Celestial Mountain (天山: tian-shan), and beyond the ends of the known world. They joined the Wolf tribes when the chieftain’s daughter was married to the old Tuman. Because of the disastrous war with the Hunnu, Wolf Star lost everyone from her old tribe except for Lupa. She was just fifteen years old and all alone in the world. Normally, a girl of her age would be married with children, and indeed, Wolf Star was pledged to someone from her old tribe, but that person lost his life in the fight.

Lone Wolf had always been good friends with Wolf Star. When they were younger, they used to spend evenings looking at the stars, talking about everything and anything their innocent hearts desired.

“I want to congratulate you for becoming our chief,” said Wolf Star, as she lay down beside Lone Wolf. “We all trust that you will be a great leader. Chief Eolycus; I like the sound of it.”

Wolf Star spoke her old tribe’s tongue. She had used it to make a special name for Lone Wolf since they became friends. Her name in the old tongue was Lupus.

“That is a heavy burden I don’t want,” said Lone Wolf. “But I made a promise to the old Tuman. May he rest in peace.”

Lone Wolf was in his late teens or early twenties. He found the aroma and body heat of a beautiful young girl so close to him to be quite unbearable. He took a deep breath and created some space between himself and Wolf Star.

“I missed talking to you,” said Wolf Star, as she narrowed the distance between them. “We haven’t chatted at all after I was pledged.”

“I missed chatting with you too,” said Lone Wolf. “And by the way, I’m sorry about your loss.”

“Everyone has suffered loss,” said Wolf Star, as she sat up and came into physical contact with Lone Wolf. “But while we live, let us live.”

The intoxicating fragrance of Wolf Star reminded Lone Wolf of a sad happiness hidden in a memory from faraway and long ago. He asked rather out of the blues, “Do you know why you’re called Wolf Star?”

Wolf Star shrugged.

“You’re called Wolf Star because you’re as beautiful as the Wolf Star in the sky,” said Lone Wolf. “It is hiding now beneath the southern horizon, but before the snow falls, it will rise again, and it will be brilliant. You will be blessed with the greatest fortunes on earth; but you must be patient.”

“How do you know so much?” asked Wolf Star, who could not take her admiring eyes off Lone Wolf. “Do you have a star?”

“Indeed I do,” replied Lone Wolf pointing southwards at the long constellation close to the horizon. “See that string of stars? It is the Dragon, and at the chest of the Dragon is a fiery red star. See it? You can’t miss it. It is the *Heart of the Dragon*, and it is my star.”

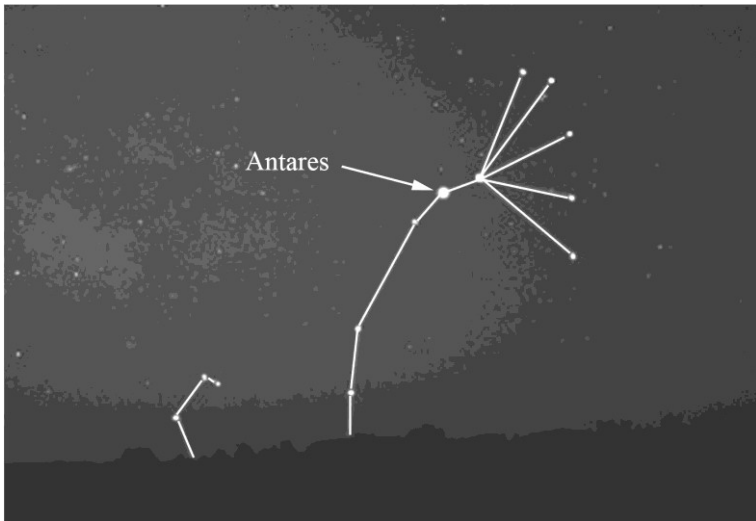
On this night, the flaming red Antares of the constellation Scorpius, first known as the Great Fire and the Shang Star, later as the *Heart of the Dragon* in ancient China, was particularly bright and dominant in the sky.

“Your star has brought you good fortune,” said Wolf Star, as she leaned over and put her head on Lone Wolf’s shoulder. “I hope it burns bright in the sky to keep you safe always.”

“Wolf Star, I’ll tell you a secret you must promise to keep,” said Lone Wolf. He could not fend off Wolf Star’s advances, so he had to tell her the truth. “I already have a wife. We also have a

baby daughter before we were separated. The time will come when I'll have to leave the tribe and go look for my family. I hope you understand.”

Teardrops like sparkling diamonds fell from Wolf Star's eyes. She said nothing as she held on to Lone Wolf.



Antares of Scorpion  
(Heart star of Dragon constellation)

## CHAPTER 16

### Paradise of Shangala

**A**rmed only with a walking staff and draped in his cloak of black feathers, Chief Deskull walked into the wall of fire that separated his army from his archenemy. By his side were his two unicorns Galizu and Faligu, meaning ‘peripatetic’ and ‘inexorable’ in the local language. Chief Deskull was the warlord of the Legion de Lude. He was the leader of an army made up of the Animorta—the Soul-Dead. Most of his soldiers were victims of the Endless War that had torn their body and soul apart. Chief Deskull wore a skull helmet that covered his left eye. In place of his eye was a *Universal Spectral Scanner* (USS), which gave him a profound perception of his surroundings, an ability his good right eye did not possess.

When Deskull became the chief of the legion, he received the mantle of leadership known as the Kanaka, a black cloak covered with the black feathers of the Equilas, a mythical bird born of water and fire. He also received the mysterious Nephruستا, the staff of power. Both relics were passed down from the ancient sage Santos Didymas, the founder of the order.

Myth said that Didymas emerged from a rock. People of his time called him the Stone man. He traveled alone in a chariot drawn by a unicorn named Lude, meaning ‘one-horn.’ The speed of his chariot was legendary. He could travel from one end of the planet to another in a matter of seconds. The sage Didymas went from one battlefield to another saving the wounded soldiers and

repairing their bodies and their souls. From them he created the army of the Animorta.

Chief Deskull's twin sons Sheru and Sachem marched behind him to the left and the right as his wing commanders. Both boys were still in their teens but had already experienced enough killing and bloodshed of several lifetimes. The name Sheru meant *Covenant of God*, while Sachem meant *Stygian Oath*. Chief Deskull had sworn oaths of heaven and hell that he would avenge the death of his parents and his sister. His sons' names served as constant reminders.

The wall of fire was extremely hot and could deter the passage of any living organisms. It was named the Eternal Inferno because the technology to extinguish the flames did not yet exist. It also created an impenetrable electromagnetic barrier. No wall however could stop Chief Deskull and his army of robots, androids, automated warbots, bionic anthropods, and soldiers clad in exoskeletal battle gear. Chief Deskull knew that waiting on the other side was the invincible Yarjun, his last obstacle to global rule and the fulfillment of his oaths.

The Eternal Inferno was created by a fuel mined from the core of this bountiful planet known as Shangala. This highly flammable material was called Erinysite, which meant the 'flames of fury.' It was the cheap and abundant starter fuel for the planet's fusion reactors. It also gave the flames multiple colors ranging from purple to blue, to green, and even to orange and yellow.

Erinysite was a blessing because it made nuclear fusion possible and economical, and thus gave the planet's inhabitants a virtually inexhaustible source of clean energy, from which was produced an unlimited supply of food. Economics for life forms became moot when the supply of energy and food was unlimited. It was also a curse because it led to unending war.

Wars usually stop when economic conditions prevent their continuation. Wars and the economy that supports them ultimately depend on food. Technological development finally removed that constrain. Wars on Shangala henceforth became endless, eternal, and existential.

The final battle must be fought. Many years ago, the Yarjun had saved Chief Deskull from certain death while he was still a young lad, gave him whatever his heart desired, and taught him everything he knew. The Yarjun considered Chief Deskull a member of the family, and yet he betrayed the Yarjun when he grew up. Since then, the Yarjun had become an inveterate enemy of Chief Deskull.

The Yarjun were born warriors. They belonged to the highest caste of the social hierarchy on Shangala. Yarjun soldiers lived and died for war. They had the mad but ingenious Stranghate Option as their insurance against peace. Peace to the Yarjun was the same as defeat.

Shangala was the oldest planet in the galaxy. It received an abundant amount of benevolent rays from a red supergiant known as Yin-Di-Ra the Lifegiver. The orbit of Shangala was so far away from the sun that one Shangala month was equivalent to approximately twenty-eight of earth's years, and there were three months in one Shangala year. The average lifespan of an anthropod, the dominant life form, was a hundred and ten years, equivalent to about 9,240 earth years. No one on Shangala ever complained that life was too short. The conditions on the planet were not only supportive of life, but encouraged evolution. Life had arisen from the primordial soup, evolved into highly intelligent beings, and become extinct several times over at Shangala.

Eventually, the solar system that supported Shangala became completely stable. The ecological system of Shangala also achieved perfect equilibrium. The largest and the smallest



creatures, the flora and the fauna, the predator and the prey, all became interconnected and intertwined in a highly harmonious nexus of peaceful coexistence.

Mother Nature moderated appetite and avarice according to the availability of sustenance. She vitiated the violence and vicissitudes of the unpredictable future. Even evolution slowed to a crawl. Nothing needed to be changed or improved when life was already perfect.

At the beginning of this Golden Age, Shangala was a land of exquisite beauty. Its rolling hills and grassy knolls were adorned with small trees laden with colorful juicy fruits known as the bassilix. The taste of the bassilix would change according to many factors, such as the mood of the person who was eating it and the temperament of the people close by. Every mouthful was a unique experience. Eating the fruit would neutralize the most deadly poison, rejuvenate the aged, and extend one's life span.

The grasses of the meadows were as colorful as the rainbow dragon Irin. Flourishing all over the land were the perennial bushes of iridescent blooms known as Diamaranth, the immortal flower of Shangala. When the flower buds opened during the unpredictable triple lunar alignments, soul-soothing fragrances of Diamaranth would fill the air. Whoever inhaled the aroma would shed all memories of hate and fall in love with the first person who came into sight. Fairylike butterflies with diaphanous wings danced and pirouetted from one bloom to another, drawing the nectar known in the local language as Ambergrace. Those who tasted even a drop of the elixir would enter a state of Elysian ecstasy.

Crystal clear springs sprouted everywhere, creating babbling brooks that meandered through the land sustaining life wherever they went. The water was sweet and refreshing, full of nutrients, and had healing properties. Those who drank the nourishing water would never get sick.

The only large shade tree of the planet was the Ailantus, also known as the *Wind-chime Tree of Paradise*. It was the home of the Seraphana songbirds. Whenever the warm breeze Flavonus caressed the leaves of the Ailantus, a harmonious symphony of heavenly harps would reverberate all over the land. The Seraphanas, which had the voice of angels, would sing the majestic chorus of Gratia Plena (Full of Grace) in the praise of the almighty God Diamaranth, who had made the paradise of Shangala possible.

Each evening, the three moons of Shangala would waltz into the night sky, reeling in unpredictable circles around the Milky Way with their bewildering dance, occasionally accompanied by meteor showers that resembled New Year's Eve fireworks.

If God was experimenting with complex life systems, Shangala was a resounding success. Why God would create so-called sentient beings who immediately declared themselves lord and owner of all, then tirelessly slaughtered each other, even among brothers, while they unceremoniously destroyed God's creations, sometimes in God's own name, is one of the greatest mysteries of the universe.

It happened on one uneventful day in Shangala, when an insignificant simian-like creature accidentally discovered the expediency of a strategically held rock. Nietzsche, Strauss, Kubrick, and Clarke must have laughed with the gods when they saw this from their heavenly thrones at Mount Olympus. The four had collaborated in the creation of the Sci-fi classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

With an abundance of food, the simians multiplied and evolved. With free time on their hands, they spent their hours solving problems with their extraordinary brain. They soon learned to improve the effectiveness of their primitive tool by fastening the rock to a stick. Then they figured out a way to sharpen the rock and turned it into a lethal weapon. They began to organize and

hunt in groups. They learned to enjoy the taste of blood. They turned into predators with an insatiable appetite. When they wanted more food, they learned to farm. Then they organized large groups to build walls and strongholds. Cooperation necessitated communications and language. From language emerged writing, and from writing civilization. All the while, they learned to slaughter each other in prodigious numbers by ever more innovative means.

Each step forward created more power and more successes for the simians. These creatures soon lorded over all flora and fauna, and they gave their subjects names. They would declare ownership of all the land, the minerals, the waters, and the air, including all that lay dormant in them, all that lived in them, and all that grew out of them.

That insignificant simian had inadvertently disrupted the harmony of nature. The ripple would eventually grow into a ferocious storm that engulfed the planet. These simians scientifically known as Anthropodius proudly called themselves Haryan, the children of Diamaranth, the people of the immortal flower.

As Chief Deskull entered the wall of fire, his skin began to sparkle. Chief Deskull's bionic epidermis was resistant to the heat of the Erinysite blaze. His unicorns Galizu and Faligu frolicked in the flames as if they were fish in water. The unicorns of Shangala were born of time and fire. Their birthplace was the Stygian river of Erinys. Erinysite was mother's milk to the unicorns.

Having demonstrated that the flames of the Inferno could not harm him, Chief Deskull raised his staff of power and the flames promptly extinguished, generating a mountain of impenetrable smoke that masked the army behind him. The unicorns had the secret power to put out the Flames of Fury.

Chief Deskull's staff of power, the legendary Nephruستا, was made from priceless nephrus, which came from the root of the Deathrider, a mythical giant tree with roots that encompassed the entire planet. The Nephruستا was crowned with a globe fashioned from the hardest material in the universe known as Sandymium, a very rare material that so far had only been discovered in Shangala. Nephruستا was unique in its existence and extraordinary in its powers.

Nephruستا was a word with no parallel in Earth languages. It meant everything and nothing; everywhere and nowhere; infinitely large and infinitely small; infinite in the past and infinite in the future; the creator and the destroyer. No one understood it or knew what it was because there was no means to probe it. No one knew how the globe was fashioned, since no tool would be hard enough to work Sandymium. In their ignorance, people just gave it a name, and they called it Nephruستا, in the same way that some humans called phenomena that they couldn't understand dark, strange, spooky, ghost, God, or the Force.

The supreme Yarjun warlord Killiam, whose name meant *God's Beloved*, was waiting for his archenemy in his impregnable Fort Destruct. He had read reports about Chief Deskull's earlier conquests. He knew Chief Deskull wouldn't meet him in battle without a few tricks up his sleeve. Killiam's Yarjun soldiers were well prepared. Their powerful and fearsome weapons of massive destruction were loaded and cocked, ready to fire at the command of their exalted leader. They had already said their death prayers. Death in battle was what every Yarjun soldier prayed for. Death was what every Yarjun lived for.

As the smoke gradually cleared, Chief Deskull and his army came into view. Chief Deskull stopped and raised his majestic Nephruستا. At that moment, three large black birds swooped down from the sky, simultaneously making a loud squawk that

reverberated all over the land of the Yarjun. Two of the birds landed on the horn of the unicorns. The third circled above Chief Deskull for a round or two before landing on the globe of the Nephruستا.

These were not real birds, because by this time, Shangala had already lost its entire flora and fauna save for some poisonous creatures of the dark, the two unicorns, and several sickly blooms of Diamaranth. Even the immortal bloom could not survive the Haryan culture of death. Chief Deskull's black birds were flying machines designed to resemble the Equilas, a winged predator similar to Earth's eagles. Chief Deskull called the two mechanical Equilas on the unicorn horns Hugin—thought, and Munin—memory. The one sitting on top of the Nephruستا was like the military standard of Imperial Roman Legions. Its name was Augin—sight.

Chief Deskull's Animorta soldiers had more than a hundred flags, representing all the tribes, clans, and warring states he had conquered. Chief Deskull used the emblem of Shangala as his own military standards in anticipation of ultimate victory. It was a stylized symbol of the Diamaranth bush.



One might expect Chief Deskull to bring enough soldiers to flatten the land of the Yarjun, but he brought only a thousand. On top of that, they were unarmed. Chief Deskull was famous for doing the unexpected, and Lord Killiam was expecting the unexpected, but for Chief Deskull and his army to walk into the jaws of the dragon unarmed was beyond the realm of stratagem. Either Chief Deskull was mad or he had a death wish.

While the Yarjun loved wanton slaughter, especially of defenseless civilians, including women, children, and their harmless electronic pets, they had no idea on how to slaughter an army of unarmed soldiers.

“Lord Killiam, as you can see, we are unarmed,” thundered Chief Deskull. “We do not seek slaughter today. We seek parley.”

“Traitor, ingrate, guttersnipe, maggot, lowest of the lowest, Vermin of Xylem, spawn of the Abyssum,” Lord Killiam responded with a string of invectives. “The Yarjun delivered you from your early grave, took you from your lowest of the lowest musician caste, and elevated you to our highest warrior caste. We spared no expense to make you whole and to give you strength. We taught you the art of war and trained you to be a leader, treating you like our own son, and what did you do? You ran away to join the Animorta (the Yarjun soldiers to a man spat in contempt at the name). You led them to attack our vassals and protectorates. Now you lead your army into our land unarmed. What more is there to say? You seek death.”

“Lord Killiam, I died when I was young, you cannot kill the dead,” replied Chief Deskull in his thundering voice. “I am Animorta, the Soul-Dead, and the dead has no fear. I come today not to fight or to dig up the past. I come to make peace. I offer peace and I offer life for everyone here. I even offer forgiveness. Choose peace and we shall live as brothers and equals. Choose war and you will all perish. We will obliterate the Yarjun and expunge its name from memory. It will be as if you have never existed. You will deliver the offer to the Supremes. I will patiently await your answer.”

The Supreme Council of the Yarjun was known as the Supremes. It normally made all the important decisions for the Yarjun and their dependencies. Since the Yarjun settled all conflicts by violence, council meetings sometimes became

gladiatorial melees, causing even delays to straightforward rubber-stamping of orders for more wars.

“That’s very generous of you!” said Lord Killiam, God’s Beloved, “But the Supremes has made me dictator with full powers to conduct the war according to my sole discretion. There is no debate. You can have our decision now.”

Chief Deskull knew full well how Lord Killiam would respond. Lord Killiam had a gun pointed at his archenemy’s head. Why would anyone in that position make peace? Lord Killiam returned Chief Deskull’s offer of an olive branch with a derisive remark.

“I have a counter-offer for you. I offer to send all of you to the Tartary Pit with our Integrated Independent Individually Identifiable Intelligent Infinity missiles. While we’re talking, our 6IM system has targeted and locked onto each and every one of you. On my order, it will keep firing until there are no life signs and no energy fields coming from the targets. Any last words?”

Lord Killiam did not wait for Chief Deskull to answer as he stretched out his arms and looked to the heavens as if he was making a supplication to the gods for justice and retribution. That was Lord Killiam’s dramatic signal for activating the kill switch of his intelligent weapon system. Thousands of smart missiles burst forth from the launchers, while the artillery and infantry of the Yarjun Defense Force also poured fire and fury from their Exponential Blunderbusses at Chief Deskull and his Animorta soldiers. The war was over in a few seconds. One person remained standing. He called himself King Kull the Benevolent, the one king to rule them all.