

The Fall
Part 1
by Stephen D. Sullivan

“Denkai, catch!” Chroma twisted to the left and tossed fangblade through the air to her mate.

Denkai flapped his scaly wings and swooped low over the battlefield, catching the weapon just above the spears of the opposing army. The mounted lancers stabbed up at the Draconum, but he dipped aside and slashed his fangblade.

The serrated edge of the powerful sword bit through the wooden hafts of the spears, shattering them. The lance blades fell into the mud, useless. The human cavalry howled in shock and fear. Their confused horses milled around the soggy battlefield. Many of the animals stumbled over half-buried rocks, and their riders struggled to maintain control.

Chroma hovered above the fray, taking a moment to admire Denkai’s work. Her sleek green wings held her aloft easily in the warm, summer drizzle. The reptilian female didn’t mind the miserable weather. In fact, it gave the Draconum an advantage over their enemies. The savage humans remained bogged in the mud, while she and Denkai flew above it.

The misty showers did limit visibility, though, making it more difficult -- even for sharp, Draconum eyes -- to hunt out the leader of these lancers. Gilmak wasn’t usually hard to spot. The human warlord was tall and boisterous, and wore only the finest clothing and armor. He had, in fact, an unquenchable taste for all the better things in life.

Chroma wondered if it was this lust for finery that had led Gilmak into his unholy alliance with the Solonavi. What exactly had the evil wraiths promised the barbaric human chieftain?

“Chroma, duck!”

Denkai’s voice snapped the Draconum back to her senses. She dipped her scaly skull barely in time to avoid the lightning javelin designed to take her head off. She felt the electric sting of Solonavi magic as the sleek shaft whisked past the tips of her pointed ears.

Chroma silently cursed herself for being distracted. She dived howling onto her enemies, twirling her curved spikelance. The Draconum spear deflected three arrowshots, shattering the bolts into splinters. The archers who fired them turned and ran. Chroma ignored them, concentrating instead on the javelin thrower.

The man didn’t look very imposing, just another of Gilmak’s human butchers: dirty armor, ragged beard, bulging muscles, bad teeth. But the way he moved told the female Draconum that he had skill, and the glint in his feral eyes showed that he would slay her if he could. Even as she turned toward him, the man was already pouring glittering liquid on another sleek, iron spear.

Chroma hissed and streaked forward, her spikelance whirling like a shield in front of her. The javelin man raised his weapon and chanted to his dark masters. Purple sparks shot from the javelin as he held it aloft -- another Solonavi enchantment. He reeled back to throw.

Unsure whether her spikelance could withstand the attack, Chroma readied herself to dodge the missile. The javelin man's dark pupils fixed on her glittering orange eyes. His mouth opened in a defiant war cry.

But before he could release his eldritch weapon, blood spurted from between his teeth. The man looked shocked for a moment, then he toppled into the mud, dead.

Denkai swooped away from the scene; his dagger, thrown with deadly accuracy, protruded from the javelin man's back.

"He was mine!" Chroma growled playfully.

"Next time," Denkai replied, smiling. He arced toward another knotted group of cavalymen. The men shot arrows at him, but their barbs ricocheted off the Draconum's heavy armor. Denkai laughed and lit into them with his fangblade.

Chroma dipped forward and grabbed up the javelin man's corpse on the fly. She yanked her mate's weapon from the body and arced toward the nearby seacliffs. Gilmak's men pelted her with arrows as she flew, but the shots glanced off her light armor and scaly hide.

She dropped the javelin man's corpse over the precipice and watched as it hit the rocks below. Something the man carried shattered, and the body burst into ball of purple fire. Chroma's scaly lips pulled back in a satisfied smile. One more of their enemy's demonic playthings gone. She sheathed Denkai's knife in her belt.

An angry bellow called her attention back to the mud-besotted battlefield. Her reptilian eyes peered through the building rain and picked out a man sporting gleaming silver and black armor and a handsome maroon tabard. Gilmak, the barbarian leader.

He sat astride a monstrous black charger, a polished bastard sword gleaming in his hand. The weapon shone with purple, Solonavi energy. The very presence of the malevolent enchantment made Chroma's scales prickle. Her orange eyes narrowed as she followed the warlord's progress.

Gilmak was riding hard toward the melee where Denkai fought -- hoping to take the male Draconum by surprise. Mired in battle with Gilmak's cavalry, Chroma's lifemate had not seen the warlord.

Keening a warning, Chroma shot through the air toward the fray. Hemmed in by the sound of clashing weapons, Denkai heard neither her cry nor the warlord's thundering approach. The cavalry around the Draconum died in droves before his fangblade. Their paltry weapons shattered against his mighty armor. Thunder clapped and the falling mist became pouring rain.

Gilmak spurred his steed forward, angling for Denkai's back. He raised his Solonavi-enchanted sword high for a death blow.

Chroma streaked out of the sky, stabbing at the warlord's exposed throat with her spikelance. Gilmak caught sight of her at the last instant and brought up his sword.

He parried the blow, sending Chroma's spear skidding aside. The Solonavi magic in Gilmak's weapon flared violet as his sword hit the spikelance.

Chroma's spear shuddered, sending a jolt up her muscular arms. Gilmak twisted his bastard sword, bringing the blade down on the spikelance's haft. The Solonavi enchantment sheared the weapon's shaft in two.

Chroma flitted back, barely avoiding a fatal cut. The point of Gilmak's sword sliced through her leather halter and traced a long line down her left breast. The scratch burned like fire, and Chroma clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

She threw the remains of her spear at Gilmak's eyes, but he batted the broken blade away. The length of his Solonavi-enchanted bastard sword sparked violet where the rain hit it. This was no mere trinket, Chroma realized, but a weapon of power. Its preternatural strength surged through Gilmak's veins.

The warlord spurred after her, death shining in his dark eyes. He swung again, barely missing her this time. The poisonous magic of the Solonavi seared in the Draconum's muscles, slowing her.

Chroma blinked to fight back the pain and tried to gain altitude. Her wings felt leaden; they responded as if they belonged to someone else. Gilmak laughed, riding down two of his own men who got in the way of his pursuit. He raised his glowing sword high.

“Chroma, catch!”

The female Draconum turned and Denkai's fangblade landed lightly in her palm. Her mate stood a dozen yards away, tangled in Gilmak's warriors, but in no serious danger. With every sweep of his claws, more barbarians died.

Chroma wheeled as Gilmak bore in on her. Her tired wings barely kept her aloft. “Fight, Chroma! Fight!” she heard Denkai call. The pleading words from her lifemate steeled her, chasing the Solonavi magic from her veins.

She raised the fangblade and parried the blow Gilmak aimed at her chest. She flipped to the right, rolling through the air and avoiding the barbarian's steed as it thundered past.

Gilmak turned and swung at her again. The cut slashed the membrane of her wing and the Solonavi fire flared in Chroma's blood once more.

Chroma surged forward, needing to end the fight quickly. Not giving Gilmak time to wheel his horse, she came over the beast's hindquarters. She swung the fangblade in a wide arc, aiming at the warlord's unprotected back.

Nearly unbalanced, Gilmak reached back over his shoulder and parried the blow. Chroma's blade slid up the enchanted Solonavi weapon. She twisted her wrist and slashed to the right. The fangblade bit deep through barbarian armor and bone.

Gilmak's head flew from his shoulders and landed in the blood-soaked mud. His horse kept going, thundering down the seaside bluffs, away from the melee. It carried its late master's body with it. The frightened animal never saw the surprised look on the warlord's face. The Solonavi's sword slipped from Gilmak's dead hand and landed in the muck atop the oceanfront cliff.

A terrified cry went up from Gilmak's men. Many turned and fled, following the same course as Gilmak's steed. Many more slumped in the mire, their sightless eyes staring up into the rain.

Chroma folded her wings and settled into the mud beside Gilmak's deadly sword. The purple Solonavi enchantment reflected in her reptilian eyes. She could almost feel its wickedness calling to the Solonavi poison in her wounds. The weapon still wanted her life. Denkai landed beside her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Aye," she replied. "And you?"

"I'm well." He glanced at the scratches across his thick armor; none had penetrated the surface. He took some golden salve from a pouch at his belt and began smoothing it over Chroma's wounds.

Chroma felt the Solonavi taint slipping from her trim, muscular body. "Should we pursue the rest?"

Denkai stretched his great wings and shook his head. "They are of no consequence," he replied, "a body without a head." A smile drew over his reptilian visage.

She rubbed her cheek against his affectionately. "One task remains, then." Her glittering orange eyes fell upon Gilmak's sword.

"Let me," Denkai said, pulling an ornate silver-colored hammer from his belt. He kneeled beside the sword and raised the adamantite mallet high. Denkai paused a moment, as though the enchantment of Gilmak's weapon fought against the Draconum's intention.

Then he brought the hammer down full force on the bastard sword. A *crack* like thunder shook the air, and the sword shattered into a dozen pieces. Each fragment seeped purplish mist which the rain did not disperse.

Concentrating, Denkai drew the remnants of the malevolent enchantment into the spellbreaker. Chroma kept silent until the last wisps of the eldritch magic had faded. Then she nodded her approval.

Denkai held the spellbreaker out before him. Turning slowly, he sought the source of the evil they had just destroyed. Rain poured from clouds, cascading down his armored skin and dripping off the silvery metal of the hammer. Finally, he said, "North."

He tucked the spellbreaker back into his belt.

Chroma smiled and tossed the fangblade back to her mate. “Denkai, catch!”

In the heart of a stone tower, Vextha bowed before her Solonavi masters. They were huge beyond size, powerful beyond dreams of force, and ambitious beyond mortal ken. Their very presence made the air sizzle.

The masters spoke with words that were not audible, and listened with ears that could not be seen. Vextha did the same, though not on nearly so grand a level.

“Pain and death,” she said, giving the traditional Solonavi greeting.

“To your enemies or yourself,” the masters replied formally.

Vextha bowed, unfolding her great segmented wings and lying them down in obeisance.

“You have seen?” the masters asked.

“Yes,” she replied without speaking. “These Draconum have become... an annoyance.”

“See to it.”

Vextha bowed again. “Their pain shall be exquisite.”

The trail Chroma and Denkai followed was not an easy one. It took them first to a village smith, who had traded with the Solonavi so that he might succeed in business. He didn’t seem to mind that the price for his success came at the cost of his youngest daughter’s life. The Draconum broke his arms and moved to the next link in the chain.

A Solonavi drone became their next connection, and behind him a mayor. Killing the mayor caused the village to rise in arms against the Draconum, but they persevered -- doing their best to slay only those who truly deserved death.

The mayor had been seduced by a Solonavi siren, who in turn reported to a wicked baroness. The baroness had been more than willing to turn on her otherworldly masters. She told the Draconum that their foes’ lair lay in a fissure on the far side of the Serpine Mountains.

Because she had cooperated, the Draconum left one tower of the baroness’ castle standing -- though they released all her slaves and set free her horses and livestock.

Even with wings, the Draconum found the the Serpines difficult to travel. The peaks reached too high to easily fly over, and thick forests covered the mountain slopes. Chroma and Denkai hiked as often as they flew, lest they should miss a clue to their enemies' whereabouts.

At night they camped under the trees, leaving no watchfire, as Draconum senses needed little light to see by. In this way, flying where they could, walking when they could not, they journeyed into the shadows of the towering Serpine peaks. They consulted the spellbreaker often, but its accuracy faded the longer they went without destroying Solonavi magic.

"The Gorga pass is near," Denkai said as they made camp one mid-summer night. "On the other side we will find our enemies."

"Aye," Chroma replied. She curled her tail around his, in traditional Draconum pairbond fashion.

He smiled and embraced her. The two of them settled in for the evening.

An hour and a half before sunrise, at the dark of the moon, Chroma woke. An unnerving, tingling sensation ran across her scales. A stirring disturbed the night breeze. Chroma's keen Draconum senses scanned the woods, seeking what was amiss.

Denkai sat up beside her. His silent glance told her that he had heard something. Footsteps, rustling among the leaves. The Draconum's glittering eyes flashed through the darkness, hunting out the source of the sound.

A small, pale child dashed through the woods toward them. She was human, not yet in her adolescence, very thin and light. She had long, silvery hair and wore a tattered white shift. Her feet were bare and covered with dirt and scratches. She stank of fear.

"Hold!" Denkai commanded, rising up and spreading his wings.

At first the child seemed frightened. Then her wide eyes changed from fearful to admiring. "Draconum!" she whispered hoarsely. "Our prayers are answered!"

"What prayers, girl?" Chroma asked.

"Prayers for warriors who will help us," the girl replied. "Our town... it is taken by a creature -- a thing of light and darkness. So terrible... I cannot speak." She turned her head away and covered her face.

"Solonavi?" Chroma asked.

Denkai put his clawed hand atop his spellbreaker, then, feeling no indication, shrugged.

"You must help!" the child said. Then, without waiting for an answer, she turned and dashed back the way she'd come.

"The human child has wings on her feet," Chroma said, smiling at her mate.

“And courage in her heart,” Denkai added. He and Chroma gathered their weapons and ran through the woods after the girl.

The nameless village lay against the mountainside, leaning drunkenly up against a wall of sheer stone. The streets were narrow; the houses’ wood and plaster walls slanted into each other. The buildings’ sides had been whitewashed, but the paint could not mask the smell of decaying human civilization. Chroma knew this place had seen better days.

“Ours is not to judge,” Denkai said, as if reading her thoughts.

“Ours is to fight the enemy,” she affirmed.

Amid the jumble of buildings abutting the cliff face, lay a meeting house. Its long girth and sturdy walls stood in contrast to the dilapidated structures surrounding it. A wisp of black smoke rose from the smokehole in the longhouse’s ceiling and disappeared into the predawn sky. Besides the smoke, the Draconum saw no signs of life; no lights shone from any of the village windows; neither people nor animals moved in the street. Still, it was very early in the day, and not unusual to find humans abed.

“The girl...?” Chroma asked.

Denkai shook his head. He, too, had lost track of her as they’d left the woods. “Could this decaying village have beaten back the enemy, do you think?”

“Solonavi? Not likely.”

“Perhaps it was not Solonavi the girl spoke of.”

“Perhaps,” Chroma said. As they neared the village outskirts, she spread her wings and took to the air. Denkai did the same. “Child...?” Chroma called as she scanned the empty streets. Even with her Draconum sight, it was difficult to peer into all the shadows between the houses.

“Here,” came the faint reply. “Here I am!”

“The longhouse,” Denkai said.

The two of them flew over the village to the meetingplace. The smoke hole was too small to admit the Draconum, so they landed at the main entryway.

The longhouse doors stood twice as tall and wide as a man. They were fashioned of thick timbers, and had been kept in good repair -- despite the squalor of the surrounding village.

“The humans still have some pride,” Denkai noted. He walked to the doors and thrust them open.

The sight inside made the Draconum’s blood run cold. A blazing fire at the far end of the room cast eerie shadows throughout the high-vaulted chamber. Massive timbers sprang from the dirt floor and supported the log roof, far above.

The villagers -- nearly a hundred -- hung from the rafters. Their feet pointed toward the ceiling, and the tips of their fingers dangled just above the floor. Their clothes had been stripped off; long scratches, burns, and cuts covered their bodies. Their blood trickled drop by drop to the earth below... but they were not dead.

The groans of the tortured filled the room. Their agony sounded like the creaking of ancient trees about to break. At the far end of the chamber, near the firepit, lay the prostrate body of the silver-haired child. Behind her loomed a terrible sight.

It stood tall, its segmented wingtips nearly brushing the rafters. Firelight glistened off the silver ornamentation of its greenish armor, casting reflected sparks around the room. Its emerald skin looked almost black in the ruddy illumination. Its eyes glowed with preternatural energy.

As the Draconum sprang into the room, the Solonavi Tormentor raised her whip and trident and keened into the darkness.

Instantly, two Solonavi drones leaped from the shadows behind the dangling villagers. They were tall, thin, and incredibly fast. Spiked horns on their insectlike heads. In their clawed hands they carried long green swords.

Chroma readied her spikelance; Denkai drew his fangblade. Behind the Draconum, the longhouse door slammed shut. A heavy iron bar fell across it, trapping the pair inside.

The drones attacked, their translucent bodies darting through the flame-lit darkness, their greenish swords flashing. The Draconum took to the air and parried. The close quarters of the longhouse allowed the lifemates little room to maneuver.

“A trap,” Denkai noted.

“Slay the head, the body will rot,” Chroma replied, eyeing the Tormentor at the other end of the room.

Denkai nodded and threw himself into the two drones, holding them at bay so that Chroma could attack the leader.

As she winged toward him, though, two more drones flew from the shadows. “There’s more!” she called.

In front of the Tormentor, the small, pale child rose. “A trap within a trap within a trap,” she said. Her voice was cold and emotionless, her eyes blank and unseeing. “And now it is sprung.”

A shape emerged from the pillars to the left of the girl. It separated from the firelit shadows -- darkness given weight and form. The thing approached the girl. As it did, the shadows melted away, revealing the terrible visage of Vextha.

The air between the Solonavi and the girl shimmered with malefic enchantment. As Vextha approached, the waves of dark energy evaporated and the girl fell to the floor -- like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The girl lay silent and unmoving.

Vextha towered over her victim. The Solonavi's red and gold armor glistened in the firelight. She stretched her segmented wings and laughed. As the Draconum struggled against their foes, Vextha looked to the wings on either side of the great hall.

Two Solonavi Channelers stepped from the shadows and took up places beside the Tormentor. The Tormentor's whip lashed out. Her wicked purple magic ripped into all the dangling victims simultaneously. A wail of agony filled the chamber. Some of the villagers -- the old, the infirm, and the young -- died immediately, their souls fleeing into the night. Others writhed in torment, their bodies anguished beyond mortal ken, but their spirits unwilling to give up the ghost. The Channelers raised up their arms and opened their mouths, sucking in the life essence of the slain. The howling of the damned, growing louder with each new death, shook the meetinghouse rafters.

Vextha keened a formula to abominable powers, working with the Tormentor and the Channelers to weave the death energy into a mighty spell.

"No!" Chroma cried, powerless to stop the massacre. She tried to fight free, to help those who had not yet perished. The drones pressed in around her, wraithlike blades flashing. More Solonavi emerged from the shadows to join the battle. The otherworldly monsters outnumbered the Draconum three to one... four to one....

The fire at the room's far end shot up to the ceiling, through the smoke hole, and into the predawn sky. In the center of the blaze, a figure formed -- a Solonavi larger than any the Draconum had ever seen, or even heard about. Its wings shattered the roof, raining timbers down among the combatants, crushing the bodies of the dead and dying villagers. Its black horns glinted in the rising sun.

The monster was fire and shadow and steel and, most of all, malice. As it solidified, the creatures gaze burned into Chroma.

"Escape!" Denkai shouted to her. "We must escape!"

"We must save the humans!" Chroma called.

"They're doomed already!" Denkai replied. "And us as well, if we don't escape."

Chroma nodded, but couldn't find her voice to answer back. In her breast, her heart shriveled like fruit in the summer sun. The wails of the villagers surrounded her, their agony beckoning, pleading with her for surcease. But there was nothing Chroma could do.

She redoubled her efforts and ran her spikelance through a Solonavi drone. It died and vanished in a cloud of purple and green mist.

“Slay them, my Titan!” Vextha called to the new monster.

The Solonavi Titan swept his hand out and batted Chroma from the air. She smashed into the ground, her body tangled with those of the drones she had been fighting. All of them rolled hard into one of the hall’s main support timbers.

Spots flashed before the female Draconum’s eyes, but she rose again before her enemies could recover. She hurled her spikelance toward Vextha. The Solonavi leader dodged aside, but Chroma hadn’t been aiming at him.

Her weapon pierced the Tormentor’s eyesocket and burst out the back of its skull. The otherworldly creature wailed and dropped her weapons. She fell to the floor and flopped like a suffocating fish. The terrible shrieking stopped, and the remaining villagers collapsed, unconscious.

For a moment, the drones seemed confused. Denkai seized that instant to slay two drones and drive another back into the oncoming fist of the Titan. The drone that hit the Celestial exploded into fragments of green ectoplasm.

Chroma stepped away from her foes and wrapped her arms around a support pillar. The timber snapped as she clenched it tight. She heaved to the side, bringing a section of the crumbling roof down onto the Titan. More roofing buried Vextha as the ceiling crashed into the raging fire. Flames sprang up amid the Solonavi, further confusing them.

The female Draconum flitted toward the unconscious child, lying at the edge of the rubble. As she touched the body, though, it withered into dust.

Shock and horror gripped Chroma’s heart. She looked around and saw that the other villagers had suffered a similar fate. Slaying the Tormentor had not been enough; the Solonavi magic had still taken its terrible toll.

Tears budded in Chroma’s orange eyes. “Denkai, come!” she called as flames surrounding them rushed higher. She spread her wings and leaped toward the sky. A drone darted after her.

Denkai dispatched a Channeler and turned to follow. Then he stopped, howling in agony.

The Solonavi Tormentor still lived -- even with Chroma’s spear piercing its head. Unnoticed by the Draconum, she had risen from amid the burning timbers. Now she thrust her trident through Denkai’s wing. Shaking from the effort, the Tormentor twisted the weapon and dragged Denkai to the floor.

“Denkai!” Chroma screamed.

A drone barreled into her. It rammed its horned head piercing her gut and carried her back into a section of burning wall. The wall collapsed. Smoke and embers flew up around them.

Half-blinded, Chroma drew her dagger and parried the drone's sword. She lifted off the ground once more, falling back, trying to escape the cloying smoke, trying to put some distance between her and the relentless enemy.

Another drone appeared out of the smoke beside her. She ran it through with her dagger, but it didn't die. Instead, it lunged forward, driving her weapon even deeper into its wraithlike form. It aimed a cut at Chroma's head.

She seized the thing's wrist, then used its blade to fend off an attack from the other drone. She lopped the attacker's sword arm off before the first broke free from her. The second picked up its sword with its remaining arm. Both came at her again.

Chroma tried to pull away from the two, but flew backward into something -- the roof of another building. Surrounded by smoke and burning embers, she hadn't seen it. Somehow she had escaped the longhouse, but now the whole town was burning. Black soot filled the air and flames leapt up all around, scorching her armored skin.

The house's roof collapsed under Chroma's weight. For a moment, she feared she would be crushed, but the village's shoddy workmanship saved her. Only plaster, light wood slatting, and slender beams pelted her scaly body. She rose from the burning wreckage as the drones attacked once more. She parried the first with her dagger. She seized a handful of coals from the fire and threw them into the second's face.

The one-armed drone keened piteously and reeled back. Chroma sprang forward and sliced its head off. She seized the dead creature's sword, but didn't turn quickly enough to parry the weapon of the other.

The drone's green blade slashed across Chroma's side, just above her hip.

Chroma screamed and hacked off the drone's left leg with her borrowed sword.

The wind changed, parting the smoke for a moment, and Chroma glimpsed the mountain nearby. If she retreated that way, she would surely be pinned against the cliffs and killed. In the other direction lay the forest, though the flames had already reached it as well.

The Solonavi drone flew at her, its movements awkward and wobbly because of its missing limb.

She parried the attack with her sword and retreated. As the smoke closed in around her, she glimpsed a terrible sight -- the Celestial Titan rising from the ruined longhouse.

"Denkai!" Chroma called. But she saw no sign of her lifemate. Perhaps he already lay dead and buried amid the rubble of the destroyed village.

Malefic, enchanted fire burned in Chroma's side where she'd been hit. The world swam before her eyes.

The wounded drone came in on her, its sword raised for the kill.

Chroma flew back into the burning woods. The Solonavi drone slashed at her, its sword biting into her unprotected shoulder.

The Draconum screamed in pain. She collided with a flaming branch and fell to the smoldering ground. The drone swooped down at her. Chroma grabbed a burning sapling, not caring that it scorched her scales. She snapped it off and swung it at the monster.

The flaming trunk crushed the side of the drone's head. The Solonavi flopped to the ground, several yards away from the Draconum. Chroma staggered to her feet, but the drone rose, too. Ethereal green ichor leaked from its cracked skull. The Solonavi hopped awkwardly on its one remaining leg, somehow refusing to die. It spread its serrated wings and took to the air once more.

Chroma went after it. The wounds in her side and shoulder screamed with poisonous Solonavi magic. Her arm throbbed as she raised her stolen Solonavi sword.

To her horror, the weapon melted into greenish mist. With its owner dead, the Solonavi enchantment no longer gave the sword coherence. Chroma drew the dagger from her belt, barely in time to parry the drone's savage counterattack.

The air shook with a swirling wind, and both combatants fought to remain aloft. Behind them, the Solonavi Celestial Titan loomed out of the smoke.

Chroma retreated, parrying the drone's blows without counterattacking, trying only to stay alive. The Titan lumbered forward; the Draconum and the drone were merely ants to it. The flapping of the Titan's huge wings beat the woodland fire into a frenzy.

Purple energy flashed from the Celestial's eyes and the forest exploded. Burning shards of wood filled the air. Flaming splinters shredded what remained of Chroma's clothing, though none of the shrapnel penetrated her scaly skin.

The Solonavi drone wasn't so lucky. It emerged from the smoke looking like a blazing pincushion. Burning wooden needles protruded from its greenish skin. The drone ignored its wounds and charged Chroma once more.

Chroma flew backward, but crashed hard into the cliff face. Smoke had hidden the mountainside from her sight. The drone aimed a cut at her head. Chroma ducked aside and the Solonavi weapon bit into the rock.

Before the drone could free its sword, Chroma drove her knife deep into its belly. She twisted and pushed, tearing through the Solonavi's magic-born innards. Warm, oozing ectoplasm flowed over her hands and arms. The drone twitched three times, shuddered, and died.

Chroma gasped with relief, but had no time to enjoy her victory.

The Celestial Titan turned its gaze on the wounded female Draconum. Terrible violet enchantments flashed from the Solonavi monster's brow.

Chroma held the dead drone before her, like a shield. The force of the Titan's magic smashed her back into the mountainside. She felt her ribs crack and bones break in her tail. She screamed.

The body of the drone evaporated under the devastating magic. The mountainside crumbled around Chroma.

The Titan bellowed in triumph as burning trees and shattered rocks cascaded down on the Draconum, burying her at the foot of the mountain.

The Fall
Part 2
by Stephen D. Sullivan

For a very long time, Chroma knew only darkness and pain.

Eventually rainwater, dripping through the rubble into the niche where she lay, revived her. Slowly, agonizingly, Chroma clawed her way up through the debris to the surface.

How long she had lain half-buried and near dead, the female Draconum could not guess. Most of her wounds had already scabbed over; some felt well on their way to healing. The Solonavi poison had dissipated from her body, but she still felt weak as a hatchling. Her ribs, side, shoulder, and tail ached terribly.

She stumbled through the charred bones of the forest, trying to regain her wits. Two thoughts played over and over through her mind: find the village -- find her lifemate, Denkai.

The towering cliffs loomed to the north. This gave her a sense of direction. At the cliffs base had lain the town where Vextha tried to trap the Draconum. Leaning against the mountain face for support, Chroma rounded the corner of the bluff.

Only ashes remained.

No sign of Denkai. Not even any real proof there had ever been a village under the shadows of the mountain. Only ashes.

Chroma collapsed. For three days and nights she wept. At last, the dire aching in her belly forced an end to her bleak vigil. She burned inside -- and not only from hunger. Desire for revenge against the Solonavi seared her guts and clenched at her heart.

She found a stream and drank the cold, bitter water until she could drink no more. Then she hunted and ate until her stomach swelled near to bursting. She tasted none of it. Sustenance didn't matter. Bitter water and tasteless meat suited her life now. She lived only to avenge her mate's death.

Perhaps, though, Denkai had not perished. Perhaps he, too, had escaped. Chroma hardly dared hope it. If he had lived, surely he would have found her.

She recovered her dagger and her spellbreaker hammer from the ruins of the mountainside. Then she knelt in the charred ruins of the village and dipped her clawed fingers into the cinders. She smeared her face and wings with black ash; warpaint for the battle to come.

Finally, she spread her aching wings and soared into the air.

For months, Chroma searched the length and breadth of the Land. The injuries to her body soon healed, but the wounds in her mind remained fresh.

She had failed Denkai just when he needed her most. She had flown away, leaving him to the Solonavi. She hadn't meant to, but it was a mistake she could never make up for. The deaths of the villagers paled in comparison to the loss of her lifemate. All Chroma could do was determine Denkai's final fate -- then slay his killers.

Search as she might, though, Chroma found no trace of Vextha or her Solonavi assassins.

In the female Draconum's dreams, Vextha and the Celestial Titan strode amid the ashes of Chroma's life. Every night, Chroma relived the terrible battle -- experiencing the same awful result. Every night, she woke screaming Denkai's name.

As the weeks passed, Chroma's world became increasingly bleak and gray. Terrible darkness -- shadows from within her own mind -- dogged her every step. Even when alone, she felt surrounded by enemies. Peasants she encountered gave the female Draconum a wide berth.

Chroma slew Solonavi wherever she found them. She rejoiced in their deaths and licked their ichor from her clawed fingers. Those who died were never the ones she wanted -- never Vextha, whose image burned black within the Draconum's brain.

Summer waned toward fall and the shadows across the world lengthened. Rumors came to Chroma of a rogue Draconum stalking the Land. He was wild, unpredictable, and deadly. Peasants feared him; they said he was mad. Descriptions of this rogue resembled Denkai.

Momentarily, the darkness surrounding Chroma parted, and her reptilian heart flew. Denkai might yet be alive! She wondered, though, at the rogue's strange behavior. Had his mind been injured in their fight with the Solonavi?

Battle rage was not uncommon among Draconum. Perhaps, in his delirium, Denkai still fought that terrible conflict against Vextha. The softskin humans might think him mad -- but perhaps he was only confused.

Chroma tracked down every rumor of his appearance, no matter how small. She visited battles where he had been seen, questioned combatants on both side.

She found scant information and much fear. Chroma was used to human fear, though the preponderance of it in the reports worried her. Bleak shadows stirred in the back of her mind.

Surely Denkai should have shaken off battle madness by now. Could he have truly gone mad? Chroma shoved the dark thoughts aside. She remained determined to find him. The bonds they shared did not end in madness. For many Draconum, lifebonds did not even end with death.

She steeled herself and followed the rumors.

Everywhere, she found death and devastation in the “rogue Draconum’s” wake. Not the destruction of Solonavi, but the ruin of human lives -- sometimes innocent lives.

The trail led her back to the Serpine mountains. The Gorga Pass lay to the south and east, now, hidden in the mountains’ vast forests.

Being so near the pass triggered terrible memories in Chroma. The smell of smoke burned in her nostrils. The crash of the mountain falling echoed in her ears. The flames of the burning village flared in her eyes. Again and again she saw her lifemate struggling against the Solonavi horde.

For a time, the visions threatened to overwhelm her. Fighting down her fears, she turned north, pursuing the most recent rumors.

On the rocky slopes of the Serpines, she met a human refugee. The woman was old and half blind, and wore a ragged sack-cloth for a dress. Her white hair lay matted against her head.

She coughed violently in response to Chroma’s questioning. “He is *death*,” the woman said. “Burned the village. No one was safe.” A tear dripped from the crone’s one good eye. “Lived there all my life, I did. Now it’s gone.”

“You lie!” Chroma hissed. “We slay Solonavi, not humans!”

The old woman backed away as if struck. “Don’t kill me, monster!” she cried. “Don’t kill me for telling the truth!”

Chroma stared at the crone. Anger burned within the Draconum’s reptilian belly. She flapped her powerful wings and shot into the air, leaving the woman cowering below.

A faint whiff of smoke drifted to Chroma on the autumn breeze -- perhaps the scent of a town burning. The female Draconum followed the scent further into the wooded mountains. A trail snaked through the forest below, paralleling the course she flew. The path to the old woman’s village, Chroma thought.

If the town still burned, perhaps Den kai had remained there -- assuming this rogue was Den kai at all. Hope and fear fought within Chroma’s breast as she cut through the afternoon sky. She mastered her emotions and redoubled her wingbeats -- flying faster, pushing harder.

In less than two hours, she discovered the remains of a mountainside village.

The burnt-out skeletons of homes smoldered in the twilight. Others buildings lay toppled, their walls staved in. The village well had been smashed, its stones and buckets scattered. The bodies of livestock littered the town’s streets. The beasts had been ripped open, their bones broken, and their carcasses gnawed. Chroma thanked the Dragon gods that she saw no dead villagers.

Dust and ash swirled into the air around her as Chroma landed amid the ruins.

Could this rogue be Denkai? Why would her mate do such a thing? Chroma had never heard of Draconum battle madness enduring for so long before.

Perhaps the rogue was not Denkai, but some evil thing. Perhaps it was some scheme of the Solonavi to discredit the Draconum race.

As Chroma walked through the ruins, her clawed foot struck something buried beneath the ash. *Bones?* she wondered. A shudder ran down her tail and her skin became clammy. In her mind's eye, she saw villagers falling, their bodies crushed beneath rubble, their flesh burning away -- all of them, turning to ash, just as Vextha's victims had done.

Chroma plunged her hand into the ash, seeking the truth. Her fingers gripped something cold, metallic. She lifted it into the light. Her heart froze.

Even caked in dust and ash, there was no mistaking it: a Draconum spellbreaker.

Denkai's spellbreaker. The adamantine hammer was burnt and twisted, its form nearly unrecognizable. Chroma had seen it many times before, though. Hundreds of times. Thousands.

Denkai had been here, amid the chaos -- perhaps at its source.

Chroma's mind groped for answers. She did not want to believe what the old woman had told her.

Perhaps, Denkai had come here to slay Solonavi agents. For years, he and Chroma had pursued that task together. Or maybe Denkai sought to avenge Chroma, even as she sought to avenge him. Perhaps grief had driven him to seek out even the best hidden of their enemies.

Yes. That could be it. Solonavi agents lurked everywhere. This town must have been full of them.

For a moment, the thought lightened Chroma's heart. Then a darker idea replaced it.

Perhaps the Solonavi had slain Denkai and taken his spellbreaker, keeping it as a souvenir. Those same monsters could now be marauding through the countryside, soiling her mate's good name. Maybe they had lost the spellbreaker while destroying this town.

Chroma turned, surveying the scene more carefully. She walked inch by inch over the ruins. Among the ashes, she found a footprint -- Draconum... Denkai. Her heart soared.

It *was* him. Sane or mad with battle lust, he had been in this village -- very recently.

She needed to find him quickly.

The smell of ashes clogged her nose, ruining any chance of following her mate's scent. The impending night would make tracking difficult, even for a Draconum. The moon wouldn't be up for hours. She could wait until moonrise, maybe find more clues amid the ruins in the meantime.

Time could be precious, though. She might lose while waiting. How long until moonrise? Chroma glanced east, along a great spur of rocks, gauging the time.

A shadow moved along the ridge and quickly disappeared in the gathering darkness.

Chroma rubbed her weary eyes. Had she imagined that winged shape?

Her heart pounding, she leapt into the sky and flew to the top of the rocks.

Nothing. No sign that the shadow had been real.

Tears budded in Chroma's glittering orange eyes. She dipped her head low to the rocky ground. A long, mournful sigh escaped her scaly lips.

She smelled something.

A scent on the rocks... a scent she knew. Den kai!

She raised her head and peered into the twilight forest atop the ridge. A shadow moved amid the trees.

Chroma flew after it.

Pine trees rose up around her, their dark needles lashing her scaly hide. She kept flying, peering into the darkness, seeking the shadow of her lover. Branches ripped at her skin and caught in her clothing. She tore herself free and kept going.

The tangle of the pines grew too dense for flying. She landed and ran after her quarry, breaking through the underbrush, shouting his name into the cool night air: "Den kai!"

The sounds of movement in the woods ahead echoed to her pointed ears.

"Den kai!"

No reply.

She ran on.

Another sound built now: a roaring and rushing like the wind; a throbbing like the mighty surf; a crashing like thunder.

Chroma burst through the edge of the forest and saw a figure standing near the precipice of a towering waterfall.

"Den kai!"

He turned, gazing at her with baleful obsidian eyes.

Chroma stopped. His eyes held no recognition. “It’s me, Chroma!” she called.

Denkai had changed. His powerful body had grown gaunt over the months of their separation. His armor was different, too -- less bulky, less metal; it didn’t look like Draconum armor. Lacquered plates covered his reptilian face. He wore a curved sword strapped to his hip.

None of this mattered. Chroma knew her mate as surely as she knew herself. Something in his eyes disturbed her, though. What was wrong with them? Was this the look of... madness?

“Denkai?”

He crouched on the rocks atop the falls, drinking, water dripping from his mouth.

“Denkai, I’ve come to help,” she said.

“As you *helped* against the Titan?” he hissed.

Her heart froze.

“I became lost in the fire,” she replied. “I lay buried under the mountain. After freeing myself, I looked for you. I looked for months—”

“And now you’ve found me,” the male Draconum whispered. “Come, my pet. Embrace me once more.” He stood and stretched out his arms to her. His wings, though, remained furled at his back.

This was no Draconum gesture of welcome. The posture seemed... hostile.

Chroma’s heart fluttered. Confusion between what she saw and what she felt tore at her. Her mate stood before her, but...

“Denkai, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. Come. Embrace me.”

She took a tentative step forward. Then another.

He gazed at her passively. Denkai. It *was* him. After so long, she had found her lifemate.

Chroma sprinted forward, her arms outstretched, her wings thrown wide. Her heart soared. He was here! At last!

Denkai smiled at her, showing his sharp teeth. “Come to me!”

Something glinted in the moonlight.

Instinct flashed a warning in Chroma’s mind. She turned aside at the last instant.

Denkai's knife missed her belly and ripped through the lower membrane of her left wing. Chroma yelped and fluttered away, landing lightly on the rocks nearby. She regarded her mate coldly. Chaos threatened to overwhelm her brain. Her wing ached with a familiar, deadly magic - - Solonavi poison.

"You are not Denkai!"

"Oh, but I am, pet. I am Denkai -- and so much more."

In Denkai's dark eyes flickered a terrible, alien spirit -- a Solonavi.

"Vextha! You are controlling him!" Chroma hissed, horrified.

"Oh, no," the possessed Draconum replied. "Your mate chose to *become* me. He's so much happier now."

"Liar!"

A wicked smile drew over Vextha-Denkai's lips. "You know what would make us really happy? Your death!" He leapt forward, his powerful wings carrying him instantly across the distance separating them.

Chroma raised her spikelance, barely parrying her mate's curved sword.

He spat in her face, his drool stinking of Solonavi magic. She flitted back, momentarily blinded, blinking the saliva from her eyes.

He cut high and then low, but both times she blocked the blows. He thrust at her neck. Chroma ducked and whirled, clouting him on the back of the head with the haft of her spear.

The possessed Draconum crashed to the ground and stumbled forward. She came in fast, her spear pointed at his back. He whipped his tail, catching her under the jaw. Chroma toppled to the riverbank.

He sprang at her, but she cast a handful of stones into his eyes. Blinded, his sword clanged against a rock as Chroma darted out of the way.

She tripped and sailed over the riverbank, toward the rushing water. Her clawed feet brushed the river's surface. The falls ripped at her, trying to pull her under. She flapped hard and her powerful wings lifted her out of the water's icy grasp.

Chroma glanced back as she arced away from the precipice. The falls roared off the mountainside and into a black abyss. Even her keen Draconum eyes could not see to the bottom.

Vextha-Denkai hurtled at her. The Solonavi's movements were awkward, not as nimble as a true Draconum. Chroma darted right, circling back toward the riverbank. She fended off his sword as she turned and sped away. He snarled a curse at her and followed.

She dipped low over the shoreline, heading for a sharp outcrop of stones jutting from the banks ahead. He barreled after her, hatred blazing in his black eyes. His powerful wings beat the chilly air. With every moment, he gained on her.

At the last instant, Chroma pulled up, shooting into the air over the rocks. The possessed Draconum couldn't turn in time; he crashed hard into the standing stones and fell to the riverbank.

He rolled onto his back, stunned, trying to regain his bearings. Chroma turned and dived at him, aiming her spikelance at a jeweled amulet in the center of his breastplate. Vextha-Denkai moaned and rose into a wobbly crouch. His wings flopped like the fins of a beached fish; his wingtips brushed the surface of the raging river. He blinked his eyes, trying to clear his head.

Finish him now! a voice in Chroma's head screamed.

Hatred of the Solonavi boiled inside her, threatening to overwhelm her senses. She stared into the possessed eyes of her former lover. Something flickered behind Denka's black orbs, something familiar.

For a split-second, Chroma glimpsed the soul of her mate trapped within the twisted Solonavi-possessed body.

She shifted her thrust and drove the spikelance through her enemy's wing, pinning him to the ground.

"I... cannot...!" she gasped.

"Fool!" the thing inside Denkai hissed.

The jeweled amulet at his chest flared, engulfing Chroma in coruscating violet magic.

The Draconum screamed as the Solonavi enchantment burned through her weary form. She yanked her spear out of the ground and stabbed it at his heart.

Vextha-Denkai stepped easily out of the way. He brought his sword down on the spikelance, shattering it. Smiling wickedly, he stabbed at her.

Chroma seized his blade as it came in, not caring that it sliced deep into her hands. She twisted her arms, wresting the sword from his grip. The weapon flew through the air and splashed into the falls.

The possessed Draconum laughed. "Not a quick and easy death, then," he hissed. He lunged forward and seized her, wings and all, in a vise-like grip.

Agony coursed through Chroma's body. With every moment, the Solonavi spell burned hotter in her veins. Her wingbones buckled and snapped under the monster's grip, but she barely felt it. The

world swam around her, a kaleidoscope of noise and pain. Above it all rose the mocking laughter of the Solonavi possessing her lover's body.

Chroma lunged forward and bit him on the face. She was aiming for his eyes, but found only bony cheek. Her fangs tore into the possessed Draconum's face. Den kai's sweet blood ran hot in her mouth.

Vextha-Denkai roared with pain. He heaved Chroma away from him. She tumbled through the air toward the cascading torrent.

Chroma tried to spread her crippled wings, hoping to stop the fall -- but her splintered bones didn't respond.

She hit the river hard. The chilly water felt like daggers piercing her skin. Her head smashed against some rocks. The world exploded before her eyes. She bit her tongue and tasted her own blood, mingled with Den kai's. The Solonavi magic ripped through her, trying to destroy her from within even as she rushed headlong toward the falls.

The water surged around her, swirling, clutching, crushing. It dashed all thought from her mind, wiping away both past and future. The evil spell suffused her, trying to destroy her identity.

For a moment, Chroma's world hung in the balance.

Then she fell -- down, down into bitter cold and darkness.

Then...

Nothingness.

The Stezul River River raced underground for many miles before debouching into a wide, shallow lake at the base of the rocky peaks. Long ago, one of the southern-most mountains of the range had exploded, venting nature's volcanic fury. The mountain smoldered for a year, until nothing remained save a burned out crater of stone and ash. In time, water from the Stezul River filled the crater, turning it into a miles-wide placid lake.

Minerals and metals were plentiful in the area. These abundant raw materials lured accomplished dwarf miners to the region. Water to support dwarf communities proved a problem, however. Though a constant, sulphurous drizzle suffused the blasted lands, only the lake provided the clean drinking water the dwarves needed to survive. "Every boon has its bane," the dwarf metalsmiths often said. Thus, the local dwarves prized the lake's cold, dark waters -- though they disliked venturing out of their underground holts to obtain it.

The dwarves who sought water that particular autumn morning were very surprised to find a reptilian creature washed up in the lake's murky shallows. The dwarves, three youngsters and an old man, crept cautiously to the water's edge. Their black eyes darted around warily; their knobby fingers nervously clutched at their water jugs. They stopped several yards away from the body and spoke in whispers.

"Be it a Mage Spawn?" one of the younger dwarves, a girl, asked.

The elder shook his head. "Nay. Not gator nor dragon, neither."

"Has you ever seen its like?" the younger boy asked.

The elder gazed at the creature's body: nearly human, definitely feminine, but with huge-bat like wings and armored scales covering her hide. Black stripe-like patterns -- reminiscent of dwarf war paint -- adorned the creature's skin.

"Nay," the old dwarf replied. "Never did."

"Be it... alive?" The teenage boy looked even more wary than the other children. He had seen some terrible things in his brief years, and knew not to relax around something that might prove dangerous.

The elder knelt down next to the creature and felt for the life beat in its neck. "It be alive, all right. Lucky not to have drowned, too."

"Where did it come from?" asked the girl. Her gaze shifted from the strange beast toward the bubbling source of the lake's black waters.

"From the Gods, do you think?" asked the younger boy.

"Aye. From the Gods of river and rock, for certain," the elder replied.

"Not demon, then?" the teenager asked.

The elder shook his head. "I've heard tell of these," he said. "Great warriors. Fiercer in battle than even a dwarven Jarl."

"Fierce?" the girl asked. "This one looks half dead."

"More than half," the elder replied. "C'mon. Help me drag her out before she pickles."

He put his hands under the female Draconum's arms. The two younger children came to help. The teenager stood warily back.

The body proved heavier than it looked. It took a ten minutes for the dwarves to drag it from the water. As they leaned the body up against some black, volcanic rock, the Draconum's eyes flicked open. The dwarves jumped back.

“Who are you?” the reptilian voice hissed.

“The people of the mountains,” replied the elder. “The gatherers of the sacred water.”

“Water...” said the Draconum, puzzled. She glanced down at her wet skin. “Was I in the water?”

“Nearly drowned to death,” replied the teen.

“Why can’t I... remember?”

The dwarves looked nervously at each other. Finally the elder shrugged.

“Maybe the gods took your memory,” the girl child suggested.

“Maybe they sent you to help our people,” the boy added.

The teen scoffed. “She’s in no shape to help anyone.”

Anger flared in the Draconum’s eyes. She tried to rise, but couldn’t find the strength. Pain and hunger wracked her slender form. She felt... *different*, though she couldn’t recall what she felt different from.

The older dwarf scowled at the teen. “Even Durgon the Lion was once a babe,” he said, quoting a favorite dwarf saying.

“Durgon was an orphan,” the boy added. “Are you an orphan?”

“I don’t know,” the Draconum replied.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked.

“I don’t know.”

The dwarves looked puzzled. “Everyone needs a name,” the teenager finally said.

Slowly, fighting the pain that burned in every fiber of her being, the Draconum rose to her feet.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It is The Lake,” the elder replied.

The Draconum’s sharp eyes glanced around the great, bowl-like shape, but saw only stone and blazing sky.

“Where is this lake?” the Draconum asked.

“In the burned-out caldera of the old volcano,” the elder said.

The Draconum nodded slowly. "Then that is what I shall be called," she said. "*Caldera.*"

The dwarves agreed.

"Help me to the rim," Caldera said.

Warily, the dwarves did as she requested. It took nearly until sunset to reach the top of the slope.

Caldera gazed from the blasted shore of the lake out over the scorched landscape beyond the mountain peaks. In her heart she felt no stirring. No memory.

Nothing.

Her life seemed as empty as the landscape surrounding them.

Is this my past, she wondered, or my future?

Origins Award-winning novelist Stephen D. Sullivan has a basement full of projects that he's worked on over the last twenty-plus years. The stacks include *Dungeons & Dragons*, *The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horrors comic*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dragonlance*, *Speed Racer*, *Chill*, *Darkwing Duck*, *The Twilight Empire*(tm), and many, many others. He wrote three of the original seven L5R samurai fantasy novels: *The Scorpion*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Lion* -- the last of which garnered him a nice trophy (the Origins Award for Best Game-Related Novel, 2001) to add to his clutter. Steve's newest book is *Dragonlance Crossroads: The Dragon Isles* (a 2002 Origins Award nominee). He's also the mastermind behind the long-running *Twilight Empire*(tm) comic strip, now being re-serialized in Campaign magazine and the new 1492 comic in *Games Unplugged*. In his spare time, he ghost-writes children's detective books and compiles proposals for new projects. When not buried under the weight of all that paper, Steve continues to write for books, magazines, comics, and games. He still does the occasional bit of artwork, too. More information on what's new in Steve's cellar can be found at: www.sdsullivan.com -and- www.alliterates.com.