

“Rise, soldiers! We embark with haste!” Landafan cried out as the company of lokari and humans began to rouse and rise.

The morning haze fortunately would not be a hindrance in their march, and with renewed strength interwoven, morale and expectations were high as the soldiers of Benedir began dowsing out the fires and mounting up for the journey ahead.

Ghirthon had found himself awakened once more by the aid of Elëyak. His back stiffened hard as an oak log while he attempted to sit up from his laid position. It was not the worst of pains he has suffered, and would soon fade away as he moved more. Still, he never enjoyed waking up from lying in a position his body favored not...while in a suit of armor.

“I had fallen asleep again,” the captain murmured.

“Nothing to be ashamed about,” the lieutenant replied. “Only an assurance to your men that your mind is sharpened. Nothing worse than a leader without a clear mind.” A sturdy pat followed upon his captain’s shoulder before handing him a skin of water.

Without hesitation, the boar-skin was accepted as Ghirthon began to quench his thirst. There was nothing like cool water on a morning’s wake, whether through the fur or down the gully. Like a rapid flowing river he allowed it to pour down his long tongue until crossing over the falls of his throat. No matter what the weather, bitter cold or scorching hot, it was one of Ghirthon’s few simple pleasures he enjoyed more than many perhaps did.

“And we certainly do not want a dry commander either,” Elëyak commented once more.

“Are my soldiers ready?” Ghirthon immediately asked after a deep swallow.

“As ready as they can be, my lord.”

“Excellent.”

The skin was immediately given back as Captain Ghirthon stood to his feet, surveying the sight before him as the troops gathered and prepared. “Excellent indeed!” he said. “Fetch my horse!”

Elëyak nodded over toward Landafan’s approaching self. “Landafan is bringing her already.” Despite the haste they would have to make in preparations of their leave, something troubled the lieutenant of the armies. A nightmarish thought. It needed to be spoken, or else he wouldn’t be able to think clearly for the rest of the chase.

“But Captain, something haunts me about this chase,” he began. “And I feel despite our hurry, this would be the perfect time to take into consideration before it is too late.”

“Take what into consideration, Lieutenant?” Ghirthon asked while tightening his belt.

Feeling this was a thing not every ear should hear, Elëyak drew closer as his voice grew quieter but crisp.

“I used to be part of the Middle-Benedirian garrison several springs ago as you know of course. Unless the routines have changed, a new shift would be taking place as of today. But I fear knowing the numbers of these orcs compared to the light defenses of the nearby villages. Now after we leave this encampment, the fresh garrison will be making its final march toward the nearest village from here.”

“Veleburn,” Ghirthon replied.

“Indeed,” said Elëyak. “Ever since the attack against North Benedir, General Xentirius has ordered reinforcements on all the lesser garrisoned villages. But those reinforcements are not arriving until today, and we are not certain how far the orcs we pursue have gotten.”

“Pardon my intrusion,” Landafan interrupted. “Elëyak, are you suggesting these beasts are intent on passing through one of our villages?”

“Yes I am,” Elëyak sighed, not particularly happy that Landafan’s Feline ears caught the conversation. “It is quite possible the orcs could have ambushed the new garrison by now and made their way to Veleburn, which is the best possible place they could run to.”

“But why would they even bother?” Ghirthon questioned, as his gaze fell steadily on Elëyak. “They are fleeing from us, and such an attack would only weaken them and slow them down. It is suicide.”

“There is one thing we definitely agree on when it comes to these beasts,” the human lieutenant replied with a hastened tongue, his tone growing more intense. “They feed on bloodshed, and their bloodlust only makes them grow stronger. Yes, it is an extremely risky tactic when fleeing from us, but if you knew your numbers were being cut down and there was little to no chance of making it home, what would be your next course of action? What would a battle hardened warrior... orc or Ameriahn... do if they knew death was their fate? If we do not arc eastward, I feel we are placing the people of Veleburn at great risk and possibly the other villages near them.”

Landafan gave a weary sigh, his crisp brown eyes aimed toward Elëyak. “You do understand that if we arc eastward, we will further the already greatedened gap between us and those vile beasts.”

Ghirthon shook his head toward Elëyak. “Landafan is right, we cannot afford that. And such an attack on a village while fleeing from us would be suicide as I stated earlier. It is not logical to the least.”

“And since when has the hatred of Mellron toward our people ever been logical?!” Elëyak snapped at the two. His breath quickened somewhat as panic showed in his eyes. However, he closed them to hide his fear and began to feel shame from the outburst toward a superior.

Landafan and Ghirthon glanced at each other, and then Landafan simply gave a bow of his head and went his way, feeling it was not his place to linger there further. Meanwhile, the captain gave a glance around, finding the attentions of a few soldiers were drawn to himself and Elëyak.

“Forgive me, Ghirthon,” Elëyak quietly apologized. “Our friendship should not be an excuse for such an outburst toward my captain.”

The Wolf lokarin gave a heavy sigh as his furred hands rested upon his hips.

“Have confidence in my abilities, Elëyak,” he began. “I have taken into consideration this fate, and will not fail our people. I have fought the orcish armies for years and I am very familiar with their tactics. So unless they wish to seal their own doom, they will continue southwest toward the dense woodlands to lose us. They know we cannot travel as efficiently on horseback through those heavy lands, and it will give them a chance for ambush. But if we move now, we may still have a chance of catching them off guard.”

Little comfort was found in Ghirthon’s words, but there was nothing else Elëyak could do, and he would not further try to persuade Ghirthon, knowing how stubborn he could be.

“Yes, sir.”

Elëyak then turned away to mount up.

Such a formal response to Ghirthon’s approach as a friend could only have been a show of Elëyak’s sore displeasure in the decision. However, there was nothing that could be done about it, he would not let up on his chance to sack the orcs because of his friend’s hunch. He trusted Elëyak with his life, however he knew the lieutenant to make rational decisions from time to time. Besides, the Wolf wanted those orcs... and he wanted them *badly*.

# *The Kingdom Come*

*Fulfillment of the Promise*

*Part One*

*Justin J. Kempo*

*This novel is written in dedication to my wife Jessica, who inspired me to continue pursuing my dream to write a novel series that would hopefully touch the world of fantasy fiction, and maybe more. I love you my Dark Angel.*

# *Chapter One*

## *The Fall of Veleburn*

“All soldiers to the east front!” shouted one of the garrison guards.

The village was never left completely defenseless, but such a full assault in one particular direction would be the breaking of any defense the village had. The orcs approached from no other direction but the east entrance of Veleburn, with little time for the rest of the garrison to muster all their strength to that particular area. Several other soldiers ordered the villagers to move as far from the east front as they could, yet some were hesitant and would only go so far as the center village in fear of being flanked from the west. However, from the watch posts, it appeared to be a direct line through the one side.

Villagers would scream in panic as women and children would flee from their homes carrying nothing or little with them. Many of the soldiers that made their way to the west front would cry out toward their folk, “Go east! Flee with your family to the east side of the village!”

“We need to get out of here!” A crimson-haired lokarin said in a hurry. The chocolate furred, black striped Tiger grabbed a hold of an older Wolf’s arm to lead him down the stairs. “If we hurry, Deomere, we may have a chance.”

“No Nefan, leave me!” Deomere insisted. “I will only slow you down; you can sprint faster than I.”

“Faster or not, I am not leaving you!” Nefan growled and pulled at the grey Wolf once more, nearly tripping him. “Even if I must carry you upon my shoulders!”

The aged Wolf allowed Nefan to drag him down the stairs below toward the lower level of his shop, reaching to the door before Deomere was able to free his right arm from the lad’s firm grasp, and pushed the Feline aside with a scold.

“Do not be a fool!” he growled. “I can only *hide*, and I will do so. Come!”

Deomere walked at quick pace despite his limp, finding a stab of pain each time he forced his leg to work in this desperate time. He led Nefan to the study area in the back room. “My boy, help me,” said he. The Wolf motioned toward one of the desks, in which he began to already push aside slowly.

Nefan’s tail gave a fast twitch as he immediately aided him. With little trouble, they slid aside the obstruction and below it laid a hatch of wood. The Inyx-eared Tiger wanted to ask what came to mind, but knew this was hardly the moment for questions. Nefan opened the hatch below to find nothing but blackness, until Deomere had brought himself a candle, lowering it near the opening to show a small but walk-able tunnel.

“Lend me a hand,” Deomere asked, beginning to step forward as soon as Nefan grasped his arm. He then quickly but carefully climbed down the little amount of stairs and reached the bottom. The ceiling of the tunnel was just a little over six feet, but securely made with wooden pillars and ceiling, leading the way and keeping from cave-ins.

Nefan was the next one to slip in, and quickly shut the hatch above them as he found comfort in the more light Deomere began to shed. However, he wondered how such a candle could now generate this much light? But that question was immediately extinguished when he found Deomere holding up an old rusted lantern he had lit, and gave the candle to Nefan.

“Where does this lead? And why haven’t you spoken of this tunnel to me?”

“There was no need to,” Deomere simply replied, beginning to quickly stride with his back slightly hunched, keeping his head from hitting above. “Keep your head low, you will need your wits to survive, not have them knocked out of you.”

“Where does this *lead to*?” Nefan asked again, this time in a more desperate manner. He could only think about his friends and family right now, those whom he loved and felt helpless to save any of them. Nonetheless he felt obligated not to hide, but fight!

“This leads to the center of the village,” the old Wolf explained, giving a harsh cough. “It’s a bit of a long walk but we must make quick to beat the orcs. We need to make it to the center before they do, and then flee west with the other villagers.”

Meanwhile upon the surface, the orcs approached the village before they began to spread. Awaiting their arrival were some forty Benedirian soldiers, with several archers readying their aim over the hillsides southward and northward of Veleburn, hidden and waiting to surprise the oncoming invaders.

The main road led through the east side directly from the breached gate, it was also the quickest way to reach any sort of settlement within the walls. Fortunately for the warriors in Veleburn, two steep hills resided near the entrance of settlement creating a very small valley, therefore giving them an element of surprise when the large, green-skinned beasts approached within range. The foot soldiers stood a bit more opened, having no other place to hide, and only totaling to twenty-five against the onslaught of seventy that approached.

“Men! Stand your ground!” a young lieutenant ordered, taking the front and awaiting for the orcs to come to them. “We will fight to our very last breath before we let these beasts pass our shields here!” The Grizzly then drew his sword steadily, bringing it to the air as he watched their oncoming doom. “May Aravu accept us all,” he whispered.

Humans and lokari stood side by side and ready as spearmen lowered their pikes and stood forward to weaken the driving force. The road was narrow between the hills offering the garrison the advantage of funneling the assault toward them rather than the orcs surrounding them in numbers. Archers were ready on the hills, hidden from view and ready to unleash an effective yet small volley on their foes.

“*Charge!!*” an orc lieutenant roared. His small army pressed in greater haste as their lust and excitement of war was fueled. Clad in their armors, they wielded axes, spears, and with some, bows. The earth trembled under their charge as they pressed forward.

“*Volley!!*” the brown-furred Bear lokarin cried. Archers emerged from hiding and arched their longbows, shooting off their first wave of arrows that whistled through the air.

The orc lieutenant – also known as Bertothar – snarled in the surprise. “*Shields up!*” he cried.

Their charge had slowed as the group gathered closer, however, not quick enough to prevent all damage from the fleet of arrows. Several of the muscular, jaw-jutting tusked orcs fell under the surprise, while many others still prevailed with their iron shields deflecting the volley. Soon a second wave had quickly fallen, bringing down two other orcs until a being cloaked in darkness appeared in devilish attire. A thick cloud of black quickly formed around the advancing orcish horde, covering them from sight of the archers. Yet from that darkened cloud shot a bolt of lightning that crackled straight toward the sky.

Cries lifted as the archers drew back, three were struck down with seared flesh from the heat of the bolt, and the others were blinded by the light. The soldiers then braced for the worse, and amidst the dark cloud came shredding through the many sword-bearing orcs.

Both sides had collided as metal clashed against metal, the front line soldiers held up their guard as pikes shred through the orc armors. Though in the same manner the monstrous beasts would forward their own pikemen, stabbing through some of the lokari as cries of both races echoed out in the brutal onslaught.

The dark army began to already press forward, using their numbers to overwhelm and push through the narrowed road.

“Hold them!” the Grizzly lieutenant cried.

Soon the enemy’s flanking maneuvers had begun. Amidst the chaos the Bear was nearly struck by spear, though he had quickly evaded away to simply cut the weapon in two, and return with a counter, stabbing through the orc’s throat.

“We cannot! There are too many!” another soldier yelled, being pushed back from the crowd of soldiers before then engaging one of the under-jawed beasts furiously.

Yet to the lieutenant’s surprise, several arrows began to once again rain down, dropping another orc or so to the ground as he saw three archers regain from the magical attack. It made him smile, but that was replaced with fright as he witnessed all three ambushed from behind. One was thrown off the hill after being stabbed through, his body tumbling down through the grass, paving his way with blood. The other two put up a momentary fight until they too had fallen under the sword.

“We need to retreat!” another soldier screamed before ran through with a spear, his body plunged into the ground and stabbed once more. They all began to drop like flies as the numbers overwhelmed them.

“*Fall back! Fall back!*” the Grizzly cried, clashing blades with another orc. Then to his doom the opponent locked blades and began to push toward him. It overpowered the Veleburnian until another foe had cleverly stuck the lieutenant in the back with its blade. Blinding pain seared through his body as he went breathless, then soon screamed, until the blade was pulled out of his flesh. The orc before him had then dealt the fatal stroke, bringing his weapon down and severing the Bear’s head.

The wooden hatch flew open as Nefan gave it a sturdy push. Hay kicked up into the air as the young lokarin raised his head for a quick glance. And at first sight he assumed they were in a barn, and after a second look, his assumption was true. He then quickly climbed up and turned around to give Deomere a hand, doing his utmost best to mute the screams and cries of the people not far from him.

Deomere got to his feet as soon as he was pulled up, giving a steady pant as he tried to catch his breath. A hand fled to his chest again to feel his galloping heart.

Amidst the screams and the roars of the monstrous beasts that were heard in the short distance, Nefan forced his feet to quickly make their way toward the barn door. He feared for the sight of what may be, but knew if he were to survive with Deomere, the wise thing to do would be to at least see what was near them in order to plot an escape. The Lynx-eared lokarin budged open the barn door only a little, therefore peaking out to the sight before him.

The invaders had breached the outer defense, and wherever Nefan looked he could see no soldiers, only villagers running for their lives. Some however had taken up arms with swords and pikes in their possessions, or some with pitchforks and sharp farming tools. The people were ready to defend what was theirs at all costs, and then the discouraging smell of smoke filled the air as Nefan's eyes drifted upward to see some of the buildings beginning to burn. Several homes and a shop had lit to flame, but not just any shop, Deomere's.

Nefan grew angry to see such a beautiful place beginning to engulf into flame and ash, he could barely see the entire structure but the upper portion stood tall enough to view from the lower grounds where the barn lay. The young lokarin had not the heart to tell the old Wolf, and so he kept silent of the matter.

"What do you see?" Deomere asked.

Such a hard question to answer. Nefan swallowed his fear and then quickly closed the barn door, seeing that the northwest path was free from orcish oppression.

"They broke through our defenses," he began. "And all I see are villagers fleeing for their lives. Some have taken up arms, and are doing their best to hold off the orcs from slaying the women and children." Nefan quickly grasped Deomere's arm and swung it over his neck to keep the weight off the Wolf's injured leg. "Come on."

Deomere gave a grunt as he shuffled off with Nefan quickly, exiting the barn through the rear door that was quite resistant to opening. But with a strong kick from Nefan, it burst open as he drove through with Deomere by his side.

Nefan kept his utmost attention to getting his old friend to a safe haven. In the same manner his heart ached to seek out his parents, though he couldn't simply leave Deomere behind either. With all the strength that Veltän could muster he would begin to drag Deomere along than wait for him to catch up, often making the old Wolf trip. Though at whatever obstacle that stood in his path, Nefan would continue to keep the aged Wolf by his side, pulling him along and at often times considered carrying him entirely – which may have been an easier route.

The two made it to the northeast road and began to cross it, though the screams and a sight off the corner of Nefan's eye caught his attention. A lokarin woman had been running with a bleeding child in her arms until she was helplessly struck down by an arrow, falling forward with a cry and dropping the limp child to the ground. Nefan's eyes grew in anger; even the mothers could not protect their own children from this devilish horror! For that moment he wanted to leave Deomere and rush forward to hide the woman, for she could yet still be alive. His eyes couldn't tear away from her motionless body as much blood began to soak into the ground from her back. She was bleeding to death, or *had* bled to death, and there was little he could say about the child, whom already was motionless as well.

Deomere chose not to look around him, nor could look; he was breathless and kept his head canted down unable to raise it. “Nefan! Why are you stopping?”

Nefan’s eyes began to water in tears as he couldn’t find the strength to flee anymore, but fight and have the privilege of slaying one of those black-blooded creatures. But he then thought of Deomere, and of a life he can save right now. The orcs came into view as Nefan counted some ten or more, charging down the roads, slaying those who came into their way, whether it be man or woman, lokari or human. The people began to drop like dead leaves from a tree in the wake of this darkness.

“Nefan!” Old Deomere yelled, giving his friend a strong nudge. “Do not look! Come, or we will die as well.”

“Alright!” Nefan gasped, forcing his eyes away. He knew the enemy troops were gathering closer toward their position, perhaps only fifty or so yards away.

The son of Aarlos gave his best strength and continued to drag Deomere along with the Wolf’s arm around his neck. They began their rough stride toward the northern village area as Nefan would push away the frightening images he had witnessed. He channeled the anger to drive his body to greater strengths to save Deomere, finding that if he could only save one defenseless life, he would have served the village to some extent.

“Nefan!” Deomere cried, losing strength in his legs and beginning to place greater weight on Nefan. “My heart! I must rest!”

“We cannot!” Nefan replied. “The orcs are right behind us, we must go forward!”

“Go without me, I am an old Wolf, help the others,” he panted, and then dropped to a soft hay pile near the back of one’s house they were passing.

Nefan let him fall for rest as he himself almost collapsed; his neck, shoulders, and legs burned and ached greatly.

“If you cannot walk at all, then *I* will be your legs!” said he. The strong-willed Feline advanced forward to bring the Wolf to his feet once more, so he could carry the full weight of Deomere.

“No!” Deomere refused, pushing Nefan away harshly. His eyes reached the young Feline as he gave a harsh pant in his struggle to regain breath. “Go!”

It was no use. Having to watch innocence die before his eyes was overwhelming enough, and then to be forced to leave his dearest friend behind. He wouldn’t do it! Yet a foul growl came to Nefan’s left, his head swinging toward the direction as he suddenly felt his heart go numb and dead, finding breathing to be a challenge in itself as a brutish orc began to advance their way.

Immediately the crimson-haired Feline would search for a weapon of sort, anything to fend off the creature of Mellron from Deomere against that heavy axe the dark soldier carried. The orc seemed very tall to Nefan, when in truth it was only but a little taller than the lokarin himself. Nothing but a rugged pitchfork was nearest to Nefan, yet he grasped it anyhow and held it up in defense and challenge to the orc.

“Away, devil!” growled Nefan.

The orc snickered, giving a toothily grin as its monstrous lion-like teeth showed in their wickedness. Nefan’s attempt of intimidation was far from this creature. Wielding its heavy weapon, it approached the Tiger with blood in its gaze. Its eyes seemed to feed off Nefan’s fear as it gave a harsh swing with its axe to sever the lokarin’s head from his shoulders.

Nefan ducked for his life, gripping the pitchfork until his knuckles began turning white underneath his thick fur. His heart felt like it would tear through his chest or jump out of his throat. He could almost hear the axe cutting the air above him, and feeling the deadly breeze that rushed by as it passed over. Normally he would have been too frightful to strike back, if it weren't for the reoccurring image of that young woman falling under the arrow along with her child. Such thoughts fueled his rage and he cried out and lunged his pitchfork forward to stab the orc.

A growling roar burst from the creature, baring teeth as the pitchfork penetrated its thigh armor. The spikes had pierced through but the wound was only minor, and made the orcish warrior reach down to grip Nefan's weapon.

A grunt then followed from the lokarin as he attempted to pull away, finding his strength be of no avail against the might of this beast as he continued to pull and squirm it away.

With little effort, the foul warrior raised its axe once more and dropped it upon the wooden staff of the pitchfork, cutting it in half, and moving swiftly forward to deal Nefan a fatal blow once the orc pried the sharper half from its leg.

Nefan's eyes widened as he found himself flung back by his own strength as he was struggling for his weapon. Some wood splinters flew into the air as he hit his back, holding the lesser deadly half of what he wielded. Before he could even curse, his foe's axe-blade came falling toward his chest. Yet swiftness overtook Nefan and he quickly rolled onto his right side, barely avoiding the axe, and knowing little of the light graze the blade gave to his left arm. His eyes shot up, and then foresaw the sharp half of the pitchfork the orc still wielded, falling to impale him. But he had then rolled to the left and avoided it quicker than the axe. Then a third attack came, but from the orc's boot as it crashed against Nefan's chest, making his body slide several feet along the ground as he clenched his cavity, attempting to catch a breath.

Every attempt only caused a sharp pain to seer through his upper torso, tears welling in his eyes from the agony of the metal boot hitting his chest, feeling as if several bones were shattered. But when he could get a breath out, the urge to scream came forth, and he let out a loud long shout in effect of the pain.

Such a scream seemed to be music to this orc's ears as it spoke in a deep voice, "Good! Scream! I want to hear your torment while I gut your belly!" The devilish beast then picked up the broken pitchfork as it advanced forward.

"No!" Deomere shouted, and fell on top of Nefan. "You will have to slay me first before you touch him!"

Nefan wanted to tell Deomere away, but he could barely speak after his scream, finding himself breathless and so very sore. It was still a struggle to breath, though thankfully, it was growing more tolerable.

"So be it," the aggressor snarled. It began to raise the four-pronged farming tool until the orc let out a loud shrieking cry. Its blood-thirsty eyes filled with pain as a force from the aft struck it down.

As its large body descended to the ground motionless, another figure with the sun behind him had stood into view. Then a known voice had emitted forth, "Deomere, Nefan, come we must go!"

"Casir?" Nefan asked quietly.

The standing lokarin dropped down to help Deomere up, then his cousin. “Thank Aravu! I thought you were dead, for I heard a scream and didn’t know what to think.”

Nefan grunted as he began to stand, running his left hand gently across his own chest, trying to ignore the soreness he felt. “Careful,” he gasped. “That bloody orc kicked me. I feel like a damned horse stepped on my chest.”

“Except a horse would have killed you,” Deomere sighed. “I told you to leave me!”

Casir picked up the sharp end of the pitchfork and gripped a single-hand axe he had found earlier. “No time to argue you two! You must be moving. I will be right behind you. Nefan, here!”

Veltān grasped his former weapon from Casir and nodded, grabbing Deomere’s arm and placing it over his neck once again. “Come on you old Wolf, we are not dying here.”

Deomere gave a soft grunt as he began to push off with his legs and keep up with Nefan, yet he felt them go weak once more as he looked up to find another orc appear from the corner before them, with bow drawn and raising it’s aim bent Nefan’s way. Deomere’s eyes had widened as a gasp followed, and immediately he pushed the lad away. “No!” he screamed, and then felt the hissing arrow penetrate his left side. Strength left him, and he fell to the ground with a loud gasp.

“*Deomere!!*” Nefan cried, yelling in agony as he saw the Wolf fall to the ground.

Though such tragedy was unpreventable, this granted Casir the time to strike back at the bowman before it could load another arrow. In his own grief and rage, the strong Tiger gave a loud grunt as he hurled his axe toward the aggressor, striking it in the face as the blade split it apart. The devilish creature then fell to the ground as black blood pooled from its mutated face.

“Deomere,” Nefan once again chanted, crawling over through the dirt and hay as he turned the Wolf over onto his back. Tears welled in his eyes as he prayed to see life still in the old lokarin’s eyes.

Deomere’s panting was heard, letting Nefan know that life was still in his friend. But the Wolf’s eyes beheld the coming darkness before him as they slowly glanced up to the crimson-haired Tiger. “Oh Nefan...” he said quietly.

“Stay with me, Deomere. You are going to be well,” Nefan spoke, forcing a light smile on his lips. “It is only a flesh wound.” His hand ran under Deomere’s head to hold him up gently, resting his right hand along the wound to help hinder more bleeding.

The Wolf’s trembling hand then reached for Nefan’s, grasping firm hold. “Take it,” he murmured, his eyes lowering somewhat as he fought to stay awake.

The Feline opened his hand up and felt that necklace the old Wolf kept so closely drop into his palm. It made Nefan tremble, and shake his head in dismissal as he watched Deomere’s fading eyes.

“No!” said he. “No! We are going to the Misty Woods together just like you wanted!”

“Find him,” Deomere insisted, closing Nefan’s fingers firmly along the necklace. “Find Raphael, and bring an end to this darkness...”

Blue eyes shot open with a quickened breath following. A nightmare was something Nefan would have much preferred, a fictional thing conjured in the deep confines of his

mind. However, reality set in as he found himself laid upon the hard wood floor of an unfamiliar place, and not in his cozy warm bed.

Sitting up, he peered around as a chill set in underneath his thick fur; it all started coming back to him, the orcs, the soldiers, Deomere... A pain then seared across the top of his head, making him groan as his furry hand patted the top of his crimson hair. A lump was felt on the crown of his skull, and shattered glass littered around where he lay. Feeling confused, he glanced up toward one of the closed windows across the room, noticing pale daylight had come, at least from what he could see from the seams of the shutters. Then his Lynx-ears stood straighter at the wails and cries that echoed near and far of the outside.

Nefan pushed himself to his feet, resting a hand on a nearby stone wall for support as he felt several shards of glass fall from his long locks. A questionable look overshadowed his features until he peered to the right to see that the stone wall he leaned against, had some shelving embedded into it, which housed several large glass jars that were mostly empty. One of them most have fallen on him...

Nefan did recall a lot of battle through the night – at least until he mysteriously blacked out – yet the Benedirian soldiers had triumphed. But victory and defeat may as well been brothers this day, even though it brought a comfort to him for the lives that *were* saved, including his own. As the fog of war had cleared, and the swords, bows, and spears were laid away, a new battle had begun. One only the heart and mind could rage with.

“Nefan!” cried a female voice behind him within the shop. “Where are you?”

Nefan blinked in surprise as he turned toward the voice behind him. “Feona? I’m here!” He started toward the barricaded corner that he recalled building for her.

As his memory continued to piece together events of the night before, he now remembered saving her from near death during the hellish attack. Nefan had piled up some tables and several cabinets he was able to move, being certain to hide and protect Feona and possibly himself if the orcs were to come. A harsh tug got the tall cabinet to just barely budge, for he found no use in taking needless moments to empty it of its goods. He was lucky enough to have the needed time to refill its shelves once he set it in place, providing a considerable amount of weight to make it difficult to move or topple. Nonetheless, he grew frustrated with it and moved to simply climb over several of the tables and chairs he had stacked to get to Feona. “I’m coming... I’m coming.”

The tan-furred Leopard lokarin smiled softly with a faint giggle to follow. “The castle’s defense was well built,” she said, “For even its own keeper finds it difficult to breach.”

Her hands planted to the ground once more as she suffered a glance to her bandaged leg. Blood stained bandages gave it less than a pleasant sight to behold, but it did the purpose of keeping the wound closed. She then raised her brown eyes toward him, watching as he began kicking down some of the well placed chairs and tables. Her ears flattened from the loud clattering noise they echoed. But a question troubled her.

“Where is Casir? Is he safe?”

Nefan gave a relaxed breath after using his strength to push away his self-made barricade. Her questioned troubled his heart as well, he didn’t know what happened to his cousin. He was caught up in saving Feona and wondered if his cousin survived it all.

"I am confident he is alright," he said. "You know Casir, he is a warrior at heart, a survivor at the least."

His feelings betrayed his confident answer. It was a mixed feeling; he knew Casir could survive a whole week in the woods with little on hand, but against an orcish onslaught made Nefan worry. The last thing he needed was Feona to fret though.

A brighter smile came across Feona's lips as her eyes lowered to her leg. "Of course, how silly of me. He is such a daring fellow." Her voice held a special serenity to it whenever she spoke of him. It was nothing deliberate; she never wished to openly express her feelings about such things. Yet her actions would often give them away.

"You have feelings for him, don't you?" Nefan boldly asked. Then turning on his heels after a path was cleared, he knelt before her to move her arm around his neck. He then felt ill at heart, Deomere's face recalling to his memory once her right arm swung around him. The thought was forced away however, she needed his help now.

"Says who?" she asked immediately with a defiant voice. A soft whine emitted from her lips when she was lifted up, the soreness of the wound catching her. Yet she was strong, and ignored the pain to the best of her ability. It comforted her however to be so near to Nefan that it was troubling in a sense. At often times she thought of Casir so much, and yet it also felt delightful to have the arms of this Lynx-eared male around her – or one arm at the moment. She felt shameful sometimes because of it.

"Says the way you look at him," Nefan replied as he began to walk her steadily away. "The way you speak about him, even the way you carry yourself around him. Which I must mention is not very close at all, you always happen to keep at least ten feet between you and him. Perhaps because you are so bashful?"

"Bah!" she exclaimed. "I am bashful of no one; he is simply another handsome male like many in the village. I can round up a few of those boys whenever I..."

The front door burst open with little warning, making Nefan nearly jump out of his boots and fur as his ears stood at attention with the quickened pace of his heart. Feona let out a quick shriek in the surprise as well, eyes widening before the door within the darkened room. The outside light nearly blinded the two as a tailed silhouette stood before them. The Tigerish form then stepped in which soothed Nefan's heart as he recognized the form.

"Casir!" exclaimed he.

"Nefan!" returned Casir. "Heavens! I thought I lost you. Who is with you?" Soon as the morning light began to fill the room even more, a comforting look came over Casir to see his cousin, and the same was shown to Feona. "Feona, you are safe as well!"

This was the closest she had ever come to him, and it made her stammer in her speech. The stout, strong, young Leopardess that she was had been reduced to an infatuated maiden in sight of a charming young male. Her head felt weighed, wanting to bring her gaze down to hide the look in her eyes but she could not, she needed to keep her pride in some manner.

"Yes I am."

"Her leg is wounded," Nefan began. "Where is Bernard? Did he...?"

"Bernard is alive," Casir replied in a mellow tone. "But he now lingers in mourning by the rubble and ash near the Old Tower."

Nefan's eyes widened slowly as panic shown on his face. He caught a glimpse of the building aflame while escaping with Deomere, but he had prayed it was only a mere nightmare!

"I must go!" he said, quickly passing over Feona to Casir. The Tiger darted outward toward the village roads and began a long run to the Old Tower.

Feona gasped faintly as she felt her weight pushed toward Casir, her hands fell upon Casir's firm shoulders while her body tingled in the sensation of his touch, and the warmth of his strong arms around her. She was speechless and felt so awkward as her eyes were raised to the black-furred, green-eyed Tiger that held her now, but then she tore them away quickly to watch Nefan run along. She felt so worried for him.

The shop was all that was left of Deomere, and the mere thought of the building in ruin brought near tears to Nefan's eyes. The Feline continued his run, dashing at his best speeds as he raced passed mounted soldiers, bodies, and mourning villagers. He couldn't look away to anything else; nothing would gain his attention, except the call of his mother.

"Nefan!" she yelled in a sad cry. "Nefan!"

Suddenly he came to a quick halt as his chest rose and fell quickly from his rough panting.

"Mother!" he called out, searching the dark roadsides for her. As soon as he turned, his ears had drawn him to the precise direction of the sound. Tearful eyes fixed on the Lioness that searched endlessly and frantically for him. "Mother!" Nefan cried again to catch her attention. His feet then took off with his body yet to catch up, making his way to her and finding her arms opened in embrace.

"Nefan! I thought I had lost you!" she began to weep, hugging him so tight it was a wonder if he'd be able to breathe.

But pain stabbed up through Nefan's that made him groan and pull away from her embrace. His arms crossed over his mid-section to cradle the throbbing that he felt against his flesh, having nearly forgotten about his wound from earlier.

"Forgive me," he grunted. "I was bruised earlier during the conflict."

A gasp came to Sari's lips as a hand lifted to cover her maw. "My poor boy! Let me see it."

Nefan refused, shaking his head as he responded breathlessly, fighting off the sting of his chest with each quick breath. "No time, Mother! Is everyone else alright? Father, Halos, Shëla, everyone?"

Through her tears she suffered a nod, saying, "They are well, but frightened for you. We could not find you during this horror. We feared for the worst."

She stepped forward and began showering him with kisses to his face, resting her hands on the sides of his face as she would nuzzle and shower him with her motherly love. "But you are safe."

A purr came from Nefan's throat; he had missed her and feared for his family as well. He did his best to return a few kisses to her cheeks since he could not hug her too well. "I love you so much! But I must go, I need to find Bernard. Return to the house and give everyone my love."

"Careful, Son," she sniffled, finally releasing him.

Nefan dashed off once again, though bringing his pace to a slower state to bring into tolerance his chest pain. His ears had flattened to hinder the weeping and sorrowful cries that surrounded him. Many lied dead upon the ground, orcs, humans, and lokari alike, many of the villagers slain like defenseless sheep. He only caught glimpses off the corners of his eyes, and refused to pay full attention to what would race by him. His intent was clear; to reach the Old Tower and seek Bernard.

It seemed like ages until the tired lokarin reached the Old Tower, finding the monument still intact, which was little to say for Deomere's home. Barely much was left of the shop that once stood tall in the village. Everything was burned to the ground, save the rear wall and just a little of the second floor, which was blackened and barely standing. Piles of blackened wood and ashes littered everything, while small kindles of fire existed to burn off whatever little was left untouched.

"No!" Nefan moaned, his eyes watering again in the tragedy set before him. Everything appeared lost, all destroyed in the rampage of before. It wasn't enough that they killed the old Wolf, but they also destroyed what he had long worked for, they destroyed his legacy.

Nefan's knees weakened as he fell to the ground, head lowered in sorrow as his locks fell to veil his face. Fingers dug into the trodden dirt below him as his teeth bore into a tight grind. Then his jaw relaxed, hearing footsteps amongst the rubble. Wiping his eyes from the blinding salty tears, they focused on a smaller figure that emerged from the morning haze and smoke. Round ears formed into clearer view as a thin tail whipped behind him several times.

"Bernard?" said Nefan, immediately standing.

Silence first existed around the Mouse; his arms cradled a few objects he was able to scramble up from the ruins. Saddened eyes rose above the eye-glasses he wore on the lower bridge of his nose.

"Nefan!" Bernard exclaimed. "Oh my lad, you are well!" He placed a box of several flasks and things down onto the ground and approached Nefan quickly, batting his hands along Nefan's body as if to be sure that his young friend wasn't an illusion. Suddenly the Mouse jumped back from the Tiger's yelp once touching his chest.

"Why is everyone hitting there?!" Nefan groaned in pain and frustration.

"What happened?!" Bernard asked in concern. "Where is Deomere?"

The question stung his ears as he gave a sorrowful look to his friend, a light shake coming from his head. "I tried to save him Bernard," he spoke roughly, having to force the words out as he couldn't hold in the pain no longer like he wished to. The Feline failed to remain strong, but felt weakness overtake him and bitter sorrow. "I tried so hard, but he was shot and... I could not do a thing!"

Immediately Bernard embraced him, swallowing his own tears as he tried to shed comfort. "You did well lad, do not blame yourself. Do not carry the weight of guilt... you cannot now."

Nefan gave a slow nod, his gaze fallen to the ground as he tried to silence his weeping. He ran a hand to his face to dry his cheeks and eyes, attempting to calm himself from it all.

"What of your family?" Bernard asked, taking a look away from Nefan and to the fallen dead.

"They are well," Nefan replied.

Bernard gave a faint smile to the young Tiger, saying, “Then you have done well.” Yet even the faintest smile that many grew so used to upon Bernard, had the most troublesome time remaining on his lips. “Many here have lost more than you know,” he continued. “Deomere’s life was not in vain. Memory of him shall remain a blessing to us all. But Nefan, there will be a time to grieve. Right now the village needs you, they need *us*. Many children lie motherless, even fatherless. And some parents *bury* their children. The young perish, and the old continue to linger.” The Mouse’s face grew bitter as he removed his cracked eye-glasses, holding his hand to his eyes wishing this were a nightmare that would end already. “The younglings need not to see such horrors that were made for brave warriors to witness.”

Nefan’s hand gently rested on Bernard’s shoulder for comfort. His own reddened eyes fell upon the bodies of soldiers and orcs that littered the roads. Off to the north side in a distant, a young Fox-child attempted to awaken her friend that lied on the road without life. She didn’t seem to understand, her innocence donned her blind to such evil that had invaded her home town. The little girl would wipe her dress and use her hands to shake the other child that didn’t move. And then as fear took her, she would rattle the body more, until sobs followed and she began to wail for her playmate that would not awaken.

Then leftwards, a Wolf wife would not leave her husband’s body as it lay lifeless and broken. She would stroke his dark hair as if he were sleeping and would often kiss his face. Then her own body had fallen limp over his own, her wails muffled against his lifeless form.

A gust of wind had brushed against Nefan’s tear-stained, dirt-crusted fur as he watched that female in agony. Thoughts continuously cycled through his mind; could he have done more? Could he have saved more lives if he were just a bit braver? If he were more careful... could he have saved Deomere? The nightmares would not end... whether it be the one before him, or the one that he has barely lived through.

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“Deomere!” Nefan spoke up, his eyes frantically searching in the Wolf’s gaze until those lids had shut forever. “Deomere,” he wept, bringing his face against the old lokarin’s chest as tears soaked his cheeks, grasping a tight hold onto the Wolf’s body and cursing himself for the life he could not save.

Casir’s own sorrow was shown along his face as he saw Deomere’s passing, and the grief that overshadowed his cousin. He felt horrible in what he would have to do next, but he couldn’t let his cousin now die. But words of comfort were hardly a thing he could think about now – they needed to *survive*. He stepped forward to grasp Nefan’s shoulder, and as soon as he did, those words he had sought for to no avail had come.

“Deomere saved your life so you could go on to save others. Others that *need* you. Now come! *Now* is not the time to grieve, but to fight!”

Nefan’s soaked face had lifted from Deomere’s body and gave a final look toward the old Wolf he grew to know since childhood. But Casir was right, this was not the time to sit here and grieve for those whose time has come. He still felt at fault for all this though. With whatever strength he had left, he stood to his feet with Casir’s help as his tears were wiped away.

Casir had quickly given him a short one-armed hug before handing him the pitchfork from earlier. “We must make it to the northwest side of Veleburn, follow me and keep your wits about.”

Nefan sucked in a breath and wiped his nose, forcing the pain behind him for later. Much was yet at stake and he would not let Deomere’s death fall in vain. He felt tempted to glance behind him once more, but he couldn’t, not matter how much he wished to. The thought of Deomere lying upon the hay without life was little to what that the Wolf deserved in death. He followed Casir.

“Stay close with me!” the dirty-haired Feline instructed as they ran at best speeds. “Always attack together, these beasts can be defeated in numbers! They are but few and this was not a large invasion force.”

“You believe we can drive them off?” Nefan questioned as he ran, hissing now and then in the soreness of his chest. Each deep breath was hard to take as he ran, but he had to keep up for the life of him. “But how? Many are too afraid and will only flee. We don’t have many like you, Cousin!”

“You will be surprised what people will do when driven so,” Casir replied with a faint pant.

And as they turned the corner of yet another house they raced by, several other villagers had engaged the orcs. They fought the devils with weapons stolen from a few bodies and their own farming and mining tools such as pitchforks and picks.

“Be of courage Nefan, we fight!!” Casir yelled, and boldly charged to aid his fellow villagers.

Nefan had given a pause as he was uncertain what to attack; the horrors and screams of war distracted him. He felt so helpless and useless, fearing to only worsen matters and become another of the dead. Yet a familiar scream was caught by Nefan’s ears, bringing his attention across the road to Feona, who crawled desperately away from an advancing orc Bowman that appeared from where torches did not light. He noticed Feona’s leg bleeding and limp as she tried desperately to hide. Nefan grew infuriated as he began making a run toward her aggressor.

Feona whimpered from her wounded leg as she dragged it along with her crawl. The orc had taken its time to load its bow with another arrow, finding satisfaction in her defenselessness. However, she knew this would give her a chance. She had bumped into a pile of pots that were in her way, and immediately grasped one and started flinging one by one toward her attacker.

“Away, beast!” she yelled. The pots spun into the air and would collide very accurately against her foe, making it growl angrily from the pots smacking into its face, chest, and arms, and of course the bow. It suddenly dropped its arrows and nearly fumbled for its bow as Feona kept up her barrage of pots and pans.

Despite the soreness of his chest, the Lynx-eared lokarin let out a loud cry to help distract the the tusked enemy as he threw his pitchfork like a javelin. But to his misfortune, his aim was off and it flew by the orc and stuck to the house beside it.

“Oops...” Nefan said to himself as his ears flattened in fright, only succeeding in catching the creature’s attention to him now.

The beast gave a frustrated roar and decided to leave the female lokarin alone, but go after Nefan. Its bow appeared broken from the female’s attacks, so it drew its iron blade for the new target.

“Nefan just run!” Feona cried out, looking around her for something else to throw, but nothing resided near.

Nefan could only stare toward the approaching devilry. He lied defenseless against this massive and mighty enemy, but courage welled up within him and he felt mightier than ever before since this whole invasion. It was as if he wielded some invisible weapon, or donned with plate armor like that of the great Benedirian knights.

“I will run no more,” he said with a low growl, and prepared to dodge any of the attacks this orc would lay.

The monstrous green-skinned creature that resembled something of a stone wall in brute, continued its advancement; purest of hate was in its eyes and the taste of blood its tongue yearned for. However, it gave a slow halt, the attention driven from the lokarin and to the east as it smelled another threat near.

Nefan felt confused with the orc’s delay, and found it a good opportunity to strike while it was distracted. But was this a trick to get him to believe that? Suddenly an approaching storm was heard in the distant as the rolling of thunder rippled through the air. Yet he realized this was no thunder of nature, but of horses! The ground trembled faintly under Nefan’s feet, the rumbling became louder, and the war cries of soldiers were approaching.

Allies had come!

Most of the orcs broke off their attacks with the villagers and ended any pursuits they engaged in. Their new targets became that of the cavalry that were approaching from the east.

Nefan smiled but glanced toward the stilled orc that had turned its back. A quick look about him was given to find some sort of weapon to send this beast to the abyss. None was found but a sword of a recently fallen Fox. Being swift about it, Nefan took up the black-blooded stained blade and returned his angered hues toward his enemy.

A sound was heard that caught the creature’s attention, though it was not the thunderous horses before it, but of metal. It had almost forgotten about the lokarin behind it! It quickly spun on its heels to face the crimson-haired Feline, giving a loud roar.

The tables had now turned in favor for Nefan. The moment the orc had faced him, it was already too late for this cursed devil. The son of Aarlos had given a mighty and swift swing toward his foe and severed the head off the orc’s shoulders in a mighty cry. He watched the body tumble to the ground while black blood spurted into the air as the beast’s heart continued to spill out whatever remained.

Battle cries and the clashing of weaponry saturated the air in the distant east, but approached ever so quickly toward Nefan’s way. He could see them now when lights of nearby flames unveiled them from shadows. They were mighty warriors, humans and lokari, riding forth on their steeds and trampling orcs that would dare to come their way, cutting down the vile things like overgrown meadow grass. But quickly he ran off the road to avoid accidentally being trampled if they came his way.

He went ahead to pick Feona up, bringing her arms about his neck. “Hold onto me,” said he.

“Thank Aravu for you,” Feona murmured, keeping her hold tight on him. It so happened they were in front of Bilberd’s shop, Feona’s uncle who sold clothing. “Nefan! My uncle’s shop! We can hide inside here.”

The Tiger spun around to find the door before him, and immediately pressed it open. “Good idea,” he commented, and brought Feona in for shelter.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Nefan Veltän*

*Five days earlier...*

Winter's herald was made known in the latter year of Ameriah, a season dear Nefan could never grow accustomed to in the month of October. Born of a commoner, yet conceived with a wild and free spirit. His mind normally drifted to the better parts of the heavens, usually amidst the clouds by day and dancing in midnight's treasure trove of stars by night. Poor Nefan was never the most gifted of farmers, perhaps because he chose not to be. Looking beyond what he saw in the present, often forgetting here and now and the times he lived in. Then again he was no different from many individuals in those times; often did many look toward the stars. Some sought signs of the future, while others could only dream of a better world beyond them, and a hope for a better tomorrow. However, the young lokarin never understood what drew him to those precious lights before the veil of night, the longing that lured his interest into the rarely existent study of astronomy.

But time now was ill for the crops in his home village of Veleburn; his family had begun gathering the harvest into the storehouses a little late this year, but not too late for a bountiful stock. Little time did he spend lately gazing upon those lights, whenever of course the clouds and mists were gracious enough to allow a peak. But for now a job was to be done, and the sun had begun descending to its rest over the west shores, recalling to his memory the radiant waves and the swells in the distant that glistened like crystal under the sun. It made him smile, and again nearly drift from reality until he caught himself. Hoisting over his shoulder a pitchfork, shovel, and tilt, the chocolate-furred Tiger returned to the barn, ready for that soft n' cozy mattress and feathered pillow his body ached for. Work was quite hard in the past week because of the late start, but most importantly, they lacked not in their storehouse.

Nefan couldn't push his feet to tread further toward the tool storage, so having mercy upon his soles he placed the tools aside near the barn doors for easy pickings. Standing them upright and leaning away safely, his blue eyes took a glance outside the barn doors. Being certain his brothers had finished their duties in the field as well, he felt it was best to lock up. The aged door of the wooden barn creaked to a shut as the twenty-two summer old latched it securely. His hands stiffened the chance they got when he wasn't moving them, quite worn from the day's work as he walked his way toward a straw-packed stone house he called home.

A chuckle preceded from Nefan's lips as he drew closer to his home. His gaze met his brother who stood upon a ladder that leaned against one side of the building, watching him patch up the roof with some hay.

“Halos,” Nefan addressed. “If you patch that roof with anymore hay we will have nothing to last us for the winter. Nor enough for the horses.”

The fur on Halos was a lighter brown than of Nefan’s, which brought out his black stripes even more than his younger brother’s. He was shorter only by half an inch, yet the eldest by three winters. Out of the three siblings, he was physically the strongest and worked hard days in the fields throughout the planting seasons.

“I saw a spot that lacked,” replied he. “Do not worry, we have plenty to last two winters!” He assured, patting his dusty trousers that matched his fur. Much so, that his wife often made fun of calling him the ‘pantless farmer’ whenever he donned himself in that piece of clothing, in addition to the tight fit they often appeared. A pea-green tunic hung loosely on his form but did little to protect him from the autumn’s chill.

“Really now?” Nefan questioned with a playful inclination of both brows hiding underneath his long bangs of crimson-red. A color quite rare in the Tiger lokari race, but frequent in the Aarlos family line. “Well if we do run low, I will be certain to feed those ridiculous trousers to the goats when they are starving to death!”

“Be my guest!” Halos laughed. “Mayan is the only one that enjoys the view, so you will need to contend with her once you do so.” With another sure pat upon the hay-covered roof, Nefan’s brother descended carefully down each step, then assured to see his younger brother advance closer to steady the ladder during his descent. “Mark my words, winter is roaring in like a lion. Though autumn be upon us, I do not remember it being this chilly this early in the previous years. Do you, Brother?”

“Nay,” said Nefan, letting his gaze trail toward the darkening gray skies in the east. A cloud blanket drifted steadily toward the west to conceal the precious lights he looked forward to each night. Such a view sank his heart.

“Nay?” Halos chuckled in question, rubbing his hands together in a ragged cloth he took from his brother’s belt. “Speaking like the dwarves now are we? All these ayes and nays. And by all means if you begin calling me ‘laddy,’ that will be it for you!” Halos slapped the rag upon Nefan’s dark-green tunic in humor.

Feeling the rag stick to his chest, Nefan pulled it off after his eyes blinked in faint stun. Once again his mind had drifted away for the moment only to be pulled right back down. “Looks like yet another cloudy night,” said he, focusing his eyes once again to the Eastern heavens. A sigh escaped his lips, a faint mist poured from his nostrils as his hot breath met the cooler air. “Does Lady Nolanna wish to punish me?”

The ladder slid aside as Halos pulled it away from the roof edge, resting the wooden contraption on its side against their home. “Now why would the good Lady do that?” asked Halos.

“You tell me,” replied Nefan, “For the past four days we had clear skies before nightfall. One of them she blanketed the stars on a later hour, as if teasing me with a morsel of her splendor.”

“You forget as well the northeastern winds blow strong and hasty in this season, more so by nightfall,” said Halos.

“Perhaps,” Nefan replied, eying his dark-haired brother. “It still seems all too strange to me.”

A chuckle emitted passed Halos’ lips as he strode toward the back door of their home. “Everything seems too strange to you. Come now, you can complain about your precious stars and continue your tales of the vicious conspiring clouds that desire to make misery

of your night life.” With a light pull of the door's iron-clad handle, it opened with ease to the escaping warmth of a burning fire and family chatter.

Of course to follow was Nefan's hand glazing the back of Halos' head as they both entered in. He then dismissed his brother's look with a coy smile after tossing the rag over his shoulder. The bitter chill was quickly brushed away by the fireplace that dwelled nearby, allowing Nefan's joints to ease better from their freezing composure. It truly was a cold night for a young autumn.

Stew was on the demand for that gathering night while two children sat by an elder Tiger lokarin. Age was kind to this individual, appearing relatively young to be grandfather of his childrens' children. The faint lines near his eyes curved with his smiling brown orbs, in match with lines at the corners of his lips as they showed his inner joy and pride. Grey streaks ran through his locks of crimson hair, while his fur was of a deeper brown than his sons, Nefan and Halos. Resemblance was clearly seen, even so with his daughter Shëla, the youngest of the three children, who passed by carrying a tray of freshly baked bread toward her mother, assisting with supper that night.

It was no ordinary supper, but a family gathering of Halos' wife and children, along with Shëla and her spouse, in addition of course to Nefan himself, who lived always with his parents.

“Oh please Grandfather,” The young cream furred Tigress pleaded. “Tell us the story of Raphael?” Little Yessa asked wholeheartedly, tucking in under her legs her autumn-brown dress. She sat upon her knees with her hands clenched along her tail in eager anticipation of the tale to be told. Those eyes never lost their child-like stare toward her grandfather, while her sister Nola, shared the same affections toward the story that would be spoken.

In light surprise, Aarlos chuckled in dismay. “Your father has not told you of the story of Raphael? I am quite shocked! It is an ancient true story in our family, something that should be passed on in time. My... I am disappointed.”

“Really Father,” Halos interrupted while changing into a cleaner shirt, standing near the three. “You act as if it is a sacred family lineage. It is but a story.”

“A true and most important story,” his father immediately added with edge. “It has been passed down from generations upon generations of our family, descending from the Mysts. And I intend to continue such legacy.”

Surprised at his father's expressive feeling for the story, Halos simply nodded and said, “Alas, I didn't know how important it truly was to you. Then again I am one not so interested by ancients of the past.”

The fifty-five summer old lokarin finally grinned to his boy before casting a gaze to his granddaughters, while replying. “Then you will sit and listen once more, until you can remember the story, as well as I have.” His attention then drew to the girls before him that sat at his knees. “And you both would want your father to tell you again too would you not?”

With young pleading eyes the girls inclined their heads to their father, sweet smiles adorning their muzzles, their father falling victim to the adoration in their eyes that was impossible to resist. Halos smiled with an added sigh as he pulled a chair over nearby, allowing Yessa to bounce into his lap while Grandfather would tell the story. Nola rested her chin upon Aarlos' knee and listened with all feline ears raised with intent.

Meanwhile, Nefan assisted in preparing the table for supper that was soon to be finished, dealing out empty bowls soon to be filled with meat and vegetable stew. He had changed into a warmer wool shirt that often hung a little loosely at the sleeve ends, the lighter brown blending well with his chocolate fur.

Shëla touched Nefan's shoulder to gain his attention when she saw him beginning to set the table. "Oh Nefan! You do not need to do this. Leave the preparation to the ladies."

The Tiger replied in a confused matter, while placing down the final bowl upon the aged wooden table. "But there is nothing else for me to do; are the ladies too proud now for the assistance of a gentleman?" A playful challenge set in his voice.

A giggle poured from his sister with a followed nudge and reply, "Not at all, but there are already three grown women here. With another individual, it may become too crowded. A reason why our darling nieces are by their grandfather than over here assisting us." She then gently rubbed her hands upon her apron as her gentle dark eyes fixed on her eldest brother and nieces, sharing the view with Nefan through the doorway, which lead into the open living room.

"Well," Nefan began in a quiet voice, leaning his weight against the doorway. "At least father hasn't lost his touch. He continues telling that story with such emotion that has not changed since our childhood."

A smile remained on young Shëla. "He finds it very important." In gentleness, her eyes rose to her brother who continued watching the four. Studying his look, she found his gaze puzzling and mindfully restless. "Why is it so hard to understand?"

"Understand what?"

"His uttermost enjoyment of telling the story?" said she, her tone bordering that of a whisper. "You and Halos never seem to appreciate that. Even in the times of our youth, you and Halos would have finger fights under the table when father was telling of Raphael and the Myst family. The adventures and trials, the love and sorrow, and the proud bloodline from whence we came."

A deeper puzzlement shown on Nefan's face while his mind gathered words in response, and chose them carefully. "It is only a story of our ancestor; he is not Aravu or a savior of mortal kind. A tale of a family I doubt truly existed. If Raphael existed, I find it hard to believe he was one of the ancients, it is only family lore. And if you were to remember the entire story, we are descendants from the family of Corran, not directly from this Raphael."

"Adopted into the family of the Mysts," Shëla crisply replied, cutting the trails of Nefan's words.

"Yet never took on the Myst name?" Nefan replied.

Shëla knew her brother, like Halos, had a stubborn will. It was always a struggle to persuade them in matters such as these. But she never knew what was in her that pushed her to try. Her brown curls bounced from a head's shake, her eyes never left her brother's. "And do you believe that Nickra son of Corran, would wish for someone like Raphael to be forgotten in our family?"

A little frustration began to finally show in Nefan's features, but he retained himself and looked away. "I only find it difficult to speak as if we are direct descendants of Raphael. Far be it if we were truly descendants by blood."

“But does it truly matter?” she asked. “Why must anything seen or done by the world be held higher than what the heart speaks? What the heart feels? You have lost that, have you? By the passing seasons I found myself parting with the Nefan I knew most of my life as a child. It was not a natural change, no, it was something more than that. A dreaded thing that has come upon all in this age.”

Nefan allowed a frown, once again lost as his hues searched in his sister’s. “What dreaded thing?”

Her lower lip curled in gently as she nibbled upon it, her eyes first glancing to her father with her nieces, and then returning to Nefan. “Loss of hope.”

His eyes lowered in brief meditation in her words, which made way for her to return to her duties in the kitchen. Such words began haunting the deepest regions of his mind, pressing past all his elusive reasoning. Rarely could he recall a greater hope that once towered high upon the peaks of his soul. However, what was there to hope for? The world grew ever darker even with the efforts of the Paladins. From youth he never found his life’s purpose, but disappointment, regret, and grief. Like a stranger in a distant land.

“And it was then,” Aarlos continued his tale to the girls. “That Raphael charged against the siege of orcs and slew many in his path. Fear was not an emotion he let linger, but a weapon to bring upon the evil he faced! And he did so with great courage along with the soldiers that followed under his leadership.”

Yessa gave a soft whine showing her disinterest in the war stories. “Grandpapa, tell us when Raphael fell in love with that angel.” The six-year old pleaded while her sister, only a year younger, nodded in agreement with Yessa.

“The stories continue after supper, girls,” their mother, Sarana, interrupted. She was graceful Panther beauty that began untying her dirty apron, awaiting her children to follow. She held a solid cream color that had fooled many to call her Lioness, save the plain lengthily tail that proved otherwise. Sarana was a fit, gentle, yet a proud lokarin in her own way. She had a heart of gold, but understood the importance of family honor. Nefan was one to find a certain admiration toward her, for after all; she most certainly knew her purpose in life.

Halos then added in, “Well, you heard your mother. Come on you two.” Gently he placed Nola down onto her feet, aiming both the girls toward the kitchen. The children gave a soft whine, eager to hear the story. However, despite the sheer temptation to burst into a fit of retaliation, they behaved in a good manner and scurried right toward the table to eat. Perhaps if they hastened, the quicker they would be ready for that story!

“Oh goodness,” Aarlos sighed in relief, placing both hands upon those old sturdy armrests and pushing himself upward with ease. “I am never good with love stories. Besides, we know so little of that part anyhow.” A chuckle gave way as he watched Halos. “You better give me a grandson soon; I need a boy who will appreciate my war stories.”

Halos chuckled and gave his father a rub and pat upon the back. “That is a possibility, Father. However as you know, that is yet another mouth to feed.”

“This I do understand,” Aarlos replied. “But you will find a way. Because what matters is the legacy you leave behind when Time takes you. When your mother and I had you three, we were not concerned about how to feed you. We made a way.”

“Well excuse me,” Aarlos’ wife interrupted, “But while you rant on about Aravu-knows-what, we have a hungry family waiting.” She gave a hastened look while her hands rested to her hips lazily.

Aarlos could only smile as he placed both hands upon her cheeks and kissed her forehead. “How thoughtless of me, Sari, we are coming.”

Halos could only chuckle silently as they both gathered by the table amongst the others. Little did they know that Nefan had been quite attentive to the conversation between his brother and his father. Out of all the family, the middle sibling of Aarlos had excellent hearing. Often as a child he would wail when the clash of a pot rattled, the loud ring of iron against iron at a distant, and a raised argument between his parents. Though as he grew, his hearing grew accustomed to many sounds, but the sensitivity always remained to an extent. Yet he could only smile as he listened, and then slipped away slowly into his own thoughts, recalling the past.

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A soft laughter emitted from the child’s lips, staring into the softening ripples in the water that revealed yet another who smiled and laughed back at him: Himself of course. Twilight was upon the land and the stars had just begun appearing from their refuge behind the fading daylight. It was a late but warm winter, just barely enough to find one’s misty breath. It was a season Nefan always looked forward to, for the sole purpose of seeing his precious lights brighter than ever. He never understood why, but the blessed stars took on a fuller grace with the added hush of the night and their oddly brighter radiance. But his eyes danced in joy when they met those lights of the night-heaven, allowing him to lay outside, even upon the bitter cold ground, gazing toward the twilight sky while each star began appearing from its hiding place as the Sun made its rest. An array of deep orange spilled along the sky, only to fade to royal purple once one’s eye traced east or west from view along the horizon.

“Nefan!” his mother called for him as she stepped outside the house. She wrapped herself warmly in a winter-shaw while closing the door behind her. “Darling, it is so cold, you should come in!”

“What was that, Mother?” Nefan asked. He propped his knees up as his back nestled against the wilted grass behind him, with his hands folded together for a pillow. Nefan always seemed to fend off the cold the best of the family, granted he being blessed with the thicker fur. It was then often in this particular climate he would wear his favorite thin sleeved cotton black shirt, that buttoned from the mid of his chest and up to his collar. Along to cover those thin legs were his brother’s old brown slacks. His mother had hemmed the ends in order to fit Nefan’s length just right, allowing the boy to run about without tripping over the fabric every so few yards. But no matter how much the stargazer could resist the cold, boots were necessary to keep his sensitive toes away from the freezing ground.

Sari drew nigh to her son while her arms kept curled around her fair hourglass form. Always having thin fur for a Tigress such as herself, she never tolerated the Ameriahn winters well like most lokari. Her chocolate-brown fur seemed to offset the tan grasses that surrounded her in the season as she tightened the shaw around herself. “I know your ears very well, Nefan Veltän. I shouldn’t need to repeat myself for you, my little mouse.”

“Arg,” Nefan grunted, “Mother, you know I hate it when you call me that!”

“Oh but what else should I call you then?” she grinned gently and sat by him, allowing the skirt of her ivory dress pool under her. “You enjoy cheese out of everyone in the family and those ears are so sensitive I bet you could hear a pin drop.”

The twelve-year old continued to stare upwards as he responded, partially distracted. “I wouldn’t really say that. And even the feral tigers have excellent hearing. Not simply mice.”

“Of course not,” she replied, humoring him while taking her share of a stare toward the nightlights. Sari admired their beauty, but not sharing nearly the interest that her son held. “Darling, what do you see in them that draws you so closely?”

“I wish I knew myself,” he replied in puzzlement, “Sometimes I wish I were up there. And I often wonder if Heaven has stars. The Paladins say that no darkness resides in the home of Aravu, but perhaps they have really really bright stars? So bright they can be seen during daylight.”

The child could only fantasize. For to him, a world without stars was frightening, for who could stand clouds every day for eternity?

“Maybe, Son,” replied his mother, letting her hand reach to stroke his soft crimson locks that matched his father’s. Her thin fingers laid play to his thin long hair, admiring its length, which was the complete opposite for Halos, who could not stand very long locks being a bother to him. “So do you name your stars?”

A gentle purr vibrated from his throat through the stroking, pointing upward toward three brighter stars southward. They aligned in a curve as of an archer’s bow, with two fainter stars in between them and behind. “Imagine in the midst of those three a connected line, which also connects to the two behind them, and what do you see?”

Delighted in the imaginary play, she continued stroking her son’s hair in love and for the sake of her chilled fingertips that found warmth in them. With a squint of her golden eyes, she observed carefully and painted those lines from her mind’s eye. “Why, it looks like an archer’s bow.”

Nefan smiled as he let his legs lay flatter to the ground. “Yes, it is Elesiar’s Bow! Named after the great archer king of the early Fourth Age.” He soon pointed to another, letting his fur-digit linger toward the sky. “And that group of lights there, that is Murthon’s Ox. A human that traveled across Ameriah solely on his ox, to return to his country after surviving a terrible loss at battle.

“You see those shapes?” she asked with narrowed eyes skyward once again, attempting to line those stars to see this ox he would vision there.

The boy sat up this time and placed his hands against the cool brown grass. “I do, every night. Some seasons they are gone, and new shapes are there. Like Murthon’s Ox, it is only seen during the winter season. And Elesiar’s Bow is seen in the East and sometimes north-east during other seasons.” As the boy continued, he brought his gaze away from his mother and before him. His red hair brushed along his temples and cheeks with a tilt of his head, curtaining his eyes from the side. “I do not understand why though, perhaps Lady Nolanna draws new shapes so us stargazers are not bored of the same ones?”

A pause lingered in the air as his gaze lifted upward again. A faint glimpse of sorrow filled his eyes however. “I love you... Papa, Halos, and Shëla, but sometimes I wish I were gone. Gone to be with Aravu, and my fathers before me. With the ancients and

kings of old, to see Lady Nolanna, and to touch the stars. For I have no purpose here.” He ended his say while tucking his legs in and hugging them.

“Of course you do,” his mother corrected, surprise filling her face. “Everyone birthed upon this world has a purpose destined by fate.”

“But I am gifted in nothing,” Nefan whined, “So what is my fate? To have no talent; no gift? I am not a good farmer, I cannot cook well, and I am too weak to fight and carry large loads. You certain Shēla is the youngest? Because I think her and Halos took all the gifts and left none for me.”

Sarī burst in laughter, adoring her son with kisses to the side of his head once she embraced him. “You are also the jester.”

“Mother!” Nefan protested while smothered with his mother’s love, feeling her lips invade to his temple, cheeks, and even the top of his muzzle. “I am serious.”

Embracing him continually, she stroked his hair once again and held him close to her bosom. “Do you truly believe I would know not who came first, second, and last from my womb?”

Nefan could only muffle out his words while being squashed against her. “Sister and I do look alike. You could have become confused?” The boy continued to argue, until he yelped lightly from his mother pinching him.

“Silly boy,” she replied, “everyone has gifts, no matter if it be one or many. You indeed are gifted, my son. Why do you feel drawn to those stars? Ever wonder that, Nefan? Not everyone can see the things you see in the heavens, or have such a passion toward them.”

Her words did not seem to lift his spirits very much, only provoking more questions in his search for purpose. “But how does that help others?”

Sarī’s golden eyes reflected the orange blush over the horizon that was to soon fade. Unable to give such an answer, she caressed him and pondered her words to come.

“People are given what is needed to reach their destiny. Do not doubt your life’s worth, and the purpose of you being here. Even if the answer you seek eludes you, it will only elude you for a season. For in due time, you will see.”

*I have yet to discover my destiny.*

“That’s it, Nefan!” Halos instructed during the swordplay, as dull blonking of colliding wood continued on for a good while. It was not very common for the lower class folk to practice such combative tactics, but it was solid truth that Halos inherited his father’s fighter spirit. Many villagers were uninterested, which rendered Halos without a partner save his father who grew increasingly busy with the harvest. Nefan often found himself assisting his brother, in his own attempt to find skill elsewhere than just the field. “Control your swings, do not throw yourself into it. Block, counter, block, counter, yes!”

It all seemed too well until Halos parried a swing from Nefan that left the middle-sibling disarmed after a quick counter. The powerful blow of Halos’ weapon jolted his brother’s hand violently that was felt up that arm. Pain forced him to drop his sword and clench the throbbing member of his body, as the sting of the rattle still lingered in his palm.

His brother gave a gentle sigh, which however was drowned out by Shēla’s praise. “Wonderful! Again!” The thirteen-year old proclaimed, sitting upon the bolder she so

avored and claimed as her own. It mounted her up a good yard off the ground, allowing a pleasant view for any duel to feast one's eyes upon.

"Why?" Nefan grunted. "So you can watch me make a greater fool of myself?" Anger fumed from the Lynx-eared Feline as he continued rubbing his tingling fur-hand. A swift kick to the wooden sword below him made the object tumble and roll several feet away, venting out his volcanic frustration.

His sister gave a frown, "Oh that is not the reason and you know it! I always enjoy good sword fights. I will marry a great swordsman one day, you will see. And he can fight for my honor." She perked a sweet smile, displaying her feminine charm.

"Yes," Halos added, "then after he vanquishes his foes, he will return home and kiss you all day." Mischievous gleam filled his eyes after a brief glance to Nefan, then looking to his sister as his lips curled and puckered in a wanting fashion. Then in a steady gradual charge, he would smack his puckered lips in a mocking kiss, threatening to kiss her.

Nefan couldn't help but grin widely as he joined Halos in tormenting his little sister. He would do the very same; smacking his lips together in large, over-exaggerated kisses into the air while coming after her.

Shēla's eyes grew in startle as she saw her brothers transform once again into the twin tormentors they were being. A growl followed as she backed up to the farthest parts of the wide bolder. "You two stop that! I mean it, you look disgusting, ew!" Finding they would not hearken – which was about every time - she could only yell out in a frightened yet delightful scream as she leaped off the bolder and began running from them. It was no wonder she was the most enduring runner of the three.

After a momentary chase the two came to a halt and had a good laugh. Nefan savored the fun for the time before he could remember his humiliation from before. "Well, I better find a lady who despises fighting then. Because I am horrible with it." A pause lingered as he stared into the distance, crimson locks brushing against his muzzle and eyes in the breeze that loomed over the hills they played on. He watched his little sister continue running until she realized they had relinquished their chase. It made her pause to be certain they had truly stopped, or else were working to trap her.

"Not everyone is good with fighting," Halos replied. "At least you know how to decently wield a sword. Besides, you have other talents." His eyes then fell to Nefan's weapon a few steps in front of him, cradled in surrounding grass and clover for a bed. A few steps later, he extended his foot out in a kick toward the butt of the blade, which made it rise quickly and allowed Halos to then hold onto the blunt contraption.

Nefan's gaze continued its fix on his little sister, watching out for her in the distance as she strode in her return, holding up the front of her skirt to escape tripping forward. "Oh? Like what?" Nefan hinted in sarcasm toward his eighteen-winter old brother.

"Well," Halos started, and then paused in bewilderment as he hesitated for the answer. He gave his arm a gentle scratch while attempting to come up with something that would ease Nefan's feelings. And then he had it! "The stars! You have a talent in discerning things in the stars, like shapes." The eldest could only force a smile, feeling foolish he could only think up one thing. His eyes dropped to the wooden plaything before returning it to his brother.

"Sounds more like one talent," Nefan sighed, grasping the sword offered to him. "A talent everyone reminds me off, thank heavens we have stars, or this wretch would have

nothing to show in this world.” A hint of sarcasm was felt in his voice again, which was caught by his sister who so happened to be in hearing range.

“Is he feeling sorry for himself again, Halos?” She asked, dropping the front of her skirt. “If so, then no matter how good he is with the sword, I will beat him up myself!” She grinned as play lingered in her voice, with a mix of seriousness to her words.

“You find this all silly, don’t you?” Nefan said while tossed his blunted weapon back down. “I manage to accomplish nothing in whatever I do except farming and star gazing. Remember mister Aelöan’s errands I used to run? Every time I would forget something, and every time he would pay me very little or nothing at all! And it was my own fault.”

Shëla batted her eyes several times while witnessing Nefan’s defeated attitude. “But Nefan, he was such a grumpy ole miser-snizer. He did not even trouble his wrinkly finger to write you a list!” She said.

“Well,” he replied, “he did write a list once, but I lost it!”

“When the Tanter boys tried to rob you,” Halos added in aid with his sister.

“Still!” Nefan exclaimed. “It was my fault in the end. I should have never walked home along that road, I knew they would be waiting for me.”

“Nefan, really!” Halos responded with an aggravated tone, fixing his eyes sharply on Nefan. “It was pouring rain and you needed to hasten home, even I would have not expected those no good animals to be waiting!”

A sigh came from the baby of the family as she looked toward Halos. “Please, the last thing I wish is for my brothers to quarrel right now.” Then she brought her attention once again to Nefan. Her river-like eyes appeared softer in their intent than Halos’ at the moment, yet a shred of sorrow lingered. “You are so stubborn, Nefan, but that does little to change my love for you, as with the hope that you will see the truth of how special you are. But in the meanwhile, you need to stop whining like a little ‘girl’ and start growing a pair!”

“What did you just say?” Nefan raised a brow in question.

“I just said, you need to stop it with this self-pity. It is really sickening,” she said with an odd, innocent smile, and with such a gentle voice.

She was quite often viewed naturally as the ignorant innocent one, yet true innocence is never ignorance as Shëla has often displayed. Like many times before, she would set Nefan straight out of self-pity and into doing something about the thoughts that plagued him. And all he could do was tease and make play of her child-like mind, taking her for granted. It was the little things in life that often daggered him. And in that angelical soft tone his little sister naturally carried, which seemed to surprisingly grow a layer of steel in the last line that left her lips about him ‘growing a pair’, Nefan could only lower his eyes in a shameful stance, unable to meet hers with confidence as he asked with sincerity, “So perhaps I am going a little overboard, however, what am I to do in finding my destiny?”

Gently moving beside him, she turned his gaze toward her with a frail hand to his cheek. “Could it be it has yet to be discovered? Some know their destiny early in life, others find out with time. You will find yours in time, my brother. I feel it as surely as I know you are before my eyes.”

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“Nefan? Nefan darling?” a soft voice called with a followed tap on the shoulder. Returning the dazed Feline back to the real world, the sheepish Nefan could only smile in such manner as he looked around to a gathered family who waited upon him for some unknown duty. Until, that is, his mother reminded him.

“Nefan, will you say the blessing tonight?”

“Oh, aye Mother.”