

THE DARKHAN ARTEFACT

Nícolas Wáltí

THE
DARKHAN
ARTEFACT



Author: Nicolas Wälti

Cover: Nicolas Wälti

Editor: NWeditions.com, <https://nweditions.com>

Copyright © 2025 Nicolas Wälti

Legal deposit: October 2025

Printed: October 2025

All reproduction, adaptation, and translation rights, in whole or in part, are reserved for all countries.

ISBN: 978-9403832418 (paperback)

Publisher: Bookmundo



to my daughter Lola

whose spirit I trust as our heroes trust in one another.

*May your courage shine brighter than any star,
your laughter echo louder than any spell,
and your heart wield more power than the greatest of
swords.*

*Like the hero of this tale,
I believe in your strength,
your truth,
and your unbreakable light.*



The Warlock in the Valley

The bells of the Imperial Academy rang across the capital with a solemn weight, calling all who heard them to silence. The sound rolled over the tiled roofs, through crowded markets, and into the shadow of the great palace where banners of crimson and gold fluttered in the wind. In the high council chamber, twelve lords and ladies of the realm sat around a table carved from black marble, their faces lit by the pale light of stained-glass windows. They were the Emperor's advisors, the

stewards of war and peace, and their voices rose in heated debate.

“The marches are burning,” growled Lord Carven, his scarred hand striking the table. “Without the Artefact we cannot hold the frontier. Send the armies. Every day wasted costs lives.”

Lady Enrel, Keeper of the Scrolls, shook her head. “The armies are stretched thin already. The Artefact will not be found by soldiers blundering through ruins. We need precision. We need the finest our Empire has bred.”

Murmurs followed. At last, the Empress herself rose from her seat beside the Emperor’s throne. Draped in silver and white, her crown a circlet of stars, she raised her hand and all fell silent. “Then let us choose. The Artefact is not a matter of steel alone, but of faith, foresight, and endurance. We must send those who carry all three.”

Names were spoken. Champions weighed. Some argued for generals, others for scholars. But again and again three names returned to their lips—the paladin Naal of the Ancient Code, first of her order and unbeaten in the field; Zelde, forest elf and Seer of Paths, whose bow never missed and whose visions saw what others could not; and Belorin, dwarf of the mountain clans, who had bested every rival at the Academy and forged weapons no smith could match. The council murmured its assent, and the Emperor struck his

scepter once upon the stone. “It is decided. Summon them.”

Though his crown blazed like fire, his shoulders stooped beneath its weight. There were new lines at the corners of his mouth, carved not by age but by sleepless nights of war. When he struck the scepter on stone, it was not with triumph but with desperation.

Messengers rode through the city, bearing the Empress’s seal. Bells tolled anew. From the cloisters of the paladins, Naal was called forth, her armor gleaming even in the training yard. From the shaded groves where the elves lingered, Zelde stepped forward, her tiara glinting as she left her people behind. From the mountain guest halls, Belorin stomped down the steps, muttering into her braids as she strapped her axe across her back. Three summons, three answers, one destiny drawing them toward the palace.

They gathered in the Hall of Dawn, a vast chamber of white stone where sunlight poured through towering windows. Naal stood straight-backed, her dark-blue eyes storm-bright, every inch the image of a paladin. Beside her, Zelde inclined her head in calm acknowledgement, red hair glinting in the light, the same composed presence she had carried through their years of training together. Belorin shifted her weight, braids clinking with metal clasps as she gave a sharp grin. “Well, looks like the three top pupils are dragged back into the same mess again. Thought we’d left the Academy’s tests behind, but here we are, aye?”

Naal allowed the faintest smile. “It seems fate insists on our company.”

“And the Empire,” Zelde added softly. “The council would not have called us unless the matter was grave.”

Belorin snorted, though her eyes betrayed a spark of pride. “Grave or not, I’ll not complain about the company. Better to stand with you two than with half-trained recruits who can’t tell the sharp end of a spear.”

Before any retort could come, heralds announced the Emperor and Empress. The throne room hushed as the great doors opened, and the sovereigns entered together. The Emperor’s robes trailed crimson across the marble floor, his crown gleaming like fire. Beside him, the Empress walked with the grace of moonlight, her eyes like sharpened glass as they swept over the three. Together they ascended the dais and took their thrones, looking down upon the chosen.

The Emperor’s voice rang deep. “The world trembles. The northern marches bleed with war, the eastern rivers choke with shadow, and the omens grow dark. Yet hope remains. An Artefact, older than the oldest empire, may restore peace—if it is found.” His gaze pierced them one by one. “You three are the finest of your kind. First of your class, masters of skill and discipline. You are my chosen. You will find the Artefact. Fail, and all falls to ruin. Succeed, and the world endures.”

The Empress leaned forward then, her words softer but no less binding. “The Empire asks not for obedience, but for sacrifice. You will leave this hall as students no longer, but as champions. Do you accept?”

Before her voice fell silent, she added with deliberate weight: “Yet steel and oath may not be enough. There is one beyond these walls, one the villagers name warlock, whose strength once rivaled even our greatest. Lola of the Valley. If you are wise, you will seek her aid—for without her, the Artefact may remain forever veiled.”

Naal bent until her forehead touched the cold stone. “By the Code, I swear it.”

Zelde’s voice was calm, yet it carried like a whisper through leaves. “The stars spoke of this before you called me. I will follow the path.”

Belorin grinned, her teeth flashing beneath her braids. “By axe and by blood, I’m with ye. Ye’ll not find sturdier hands than mine.”

The Emperor nodded once, satisfied. The Empress’s eyes softened, if only for a breath. And so the bell rang a final time, sealing their fate.

The following morning, each prepared for the road in their own way. Naal visited the armory of her order, where her sword of impossible metal was polished to a mirror’s gleam. She donned her full plate piece by piece, each buckle fastened with a whispered verse from the Code. Into her pack she placed little

beyond essentials—bandages, a flask of oil, a spare cloak. Her greatest weight was her armor, her greatest shield her oath.

Zelde moved like a shadow through the Academy's outer gardens, gathering herbs she alone knew how to preserve. She selected arrows from the fletchers' hall, testing each for balance before sliding them into her quiver. Into her satchel she placed dried roots, a polished stone for scrying, and flint wrapped in soft cloth. Her bow, taller than herself, she strung with reverence, murmuring to the spirits of the wood.

Belorin stomped through the dwarven quarters, demanding tools and supplies with no patience for ceremony. She stuffed coils of rope, iron spikes, a hammer, and a whetstone into her pack, then added bundles of dried meat and hard bread wrapped in wax cloth. She oiled the joints of her chainmail until it gleamed, tested the edge of her carved axe with her thumb, and spat in satisfaction. "Aye. That'll cleave."

By midday, the three met in the Academy's courtyard. Naal's armor gleamed like a beacon. Zelde's green cloak blended with the ivy along the walls. Belorin's pack bulged with practical burdens, her braids heavy with metal clasps. For a moment they simply studied one another, strangers bound by fate. Then Naal extended her gauntleted hand. "Before we leave these walls, let us swear something greater than obedience to crown or Code. We must swear to each other."

Zelde placed her long fingers over Naal's hand, her eyes calm as still water. "I will see the path through, no matter where it leads. You have my bow, my sight, and my loyalty."

Belorin slapped her calloused hand atop theirs, grinning. "And ye've my axe, my steel, and my stubborn arse till the end. By the stone, I'll not leave either of ye behind."

Naal's dark-blue eyes gleamed as she spoke. "Then it is sworn. Whatever comes, we endure together."

So their journey began. They departed the capital at dawn, Naal in gleaming plate with her impossible sword at her side, Zelde in green cloak and silver tiara, Belorin in chainmail and burdened with packs of rope, flasks, and tools the others had not thought to bring. Farmers bowed their heads as they passed, merchants whispered, and children followed at a distance until the guards turned them away. Three champions of the Empire—though none knew what fate awaited them beyond the gates.

The first day was long, the stone roads giving way to dirt paths across the fertile plains. The sun was hot, and Belorin grumbled at the pace Naal set. "By Moradin's beard, paladin, ye've legs longer than a plow horse. Spare a thought for those of us closer to the ground, aye?" Naal did not slow. "The world will not wait for shorter legs." Zelde smirked, eyes on the sky. "And yet the dwarf keeps up. Perhaps you simply enjoy

complaining, Belorin.” The dwarf’s laugh rolled deep. “Aye, perhaps I do.”

That night they camped by a bend in the river. Belorin struck flint to wood, sparks catching until flames roared. She sat back quickly, unease flickering in her dark eyes as the fire grew. Naal polished her gauntlets, murmuring the prayers of the Code, while Zelde vanished into the woods. She returned with a rabbit, skinned it with deft motions, and set it roasting over the fire. The smell filled the night. Belorin sniffed appreciatively despite her unease. “By the stone, elf, ye’re handy with more than a bow.” Zelde’s lips curved faintly. “The forest provides, if you know how to ask.” Naal said nothing, but her eyes lingered on the flames longer than usual, as if searching for omens in the sparks.

Belorin sniffed the air hungrily, yet shuffled her boots back from the sparks as though each ember might leap for her braids. Her stomach growled louder than her pride, but her hands gripped her knees rather than reaching too near the blaze.

Naal’s gaze lingered on the flames longer than was her habit. The crackle was no simple comfort—it carried the memory of a burning home, her parents’ voices lost in smoke. She clenched her gauntlets tighter, whispering verses of the Code as though to drown the crackle of memory.

On the second day, they entered wild lands. Forests closed around them, shadows stretching long

between oaks and birches. Shrines stood abandoned, moss covering the faces of forgotten gods. Belorin hummed mountain songs to keep her courage steady, her r's rolling like drums. Zelde walked with one hand brushing the runes of her tiara, listening to whispers none else could hear. Naal led in silence, her gaze sharp, her stride unbroken.

Zelde slowed, one hand brushing her silver tiara. Her green eyes glazed as if catching starlight in daylight. "Something waits east," she murmured, "a vast water under strange stars." Then, as quickly as it came, the vision faded, and she walked on.

The third day brought clouds heavy and grey, the road narrowing to a muddy track. When at last the valley opened, they saw a hamlet tucked between hills, smoke rising from thatched roofs. Children played in the lanes, chickens scattered at their boots, but when the villagers saw the trio, silence rippled through the streets. Doors shut. Curtains twitched. Whispers spread. They crossed themselves and pointed—not at Naal's gleaming armor or Zelde's bow, but at the road beyond the hamlet, where a lone cottage stood among wildflowers and pine, its lintel marked with strange runes that glowed faintly in the dim light.

One old woman tugged her shawl close and whispered, not to them but to her neighbor: "Her flowers bloom in winter." The words spread like a chill, and shutters slammed in answer.

Naal's jaw tightened. "She is here." Belorin grunted. "Let's hope she's worth the trouble." Zelde's green eyes were unreadable. "She will be... if she chooses to be."

They approached the cottage. Up close, it was unlike the simple homes of the villagers. The walls were of pale stone veined with silver, vines climbing in purposeful patterns that seemed more like wards than weeds. The roof was shingled in dark slate, etched with sigils visible only when the light struck at an angle. The garden was wild but strangely deliberate—herbs, roses, and poisonous-looking flowers all grew in clusters, watched over by carved wooden totems shaped like owls and foxes. A small stream diverted itself neatly around the house, and on its banks stood a willow that leaned protectively toward the door. The cottage itself seemed alive, as though listening.

As they left the hamlet behind, the road narrowed into a deer trail, twisting beneath tall pines. Once, a branch snapped above them and Belorin swung her axe skyward with a curse, only to find a squirrel scattering cones. The tension broke into brief laughter, but the silence that followed was heavier, as if the forest itself held its breath before the warlock's door.

Before Naal could knock, the door opened. A warm smell wafted out—not incense, not potions, but butter, sugar, and vanilla. A tray of cupcakes floated behind the woman who appeared in the doorway, borne by invisible hands. Lola stood framed in shadow and firelight, her skin carrying a purple sheen that caught the

dying sun, her long brown hair falling in waves, and her eyes, sharp and weary, holding centuries in their depths. She wore only a simple dress, dusted faintly with flour at the sleeves, and the air thrummed with power around her despite the domestic scene.

At her belt, half-hidden by the flour-dusted folds of her dress, hung a shard of obsidian that pulsed faintly as though it too regarded the visitors. Above her brow a pendulum caught the last of the sun, swaying as if stirred by unseen breath.

“Warlock,” Naal said, voice firm. “We come on behalf of the Emperor. We seek the Artefact.”

Lola raised one brow, gesturing idly as the cupcakes set themselves neatly upon a side table just inside the door. “Of course you do. Paladins don’t march three days through mud to borrow sugar. Though clearly, you could have.”

Belorin’s nose twitched at the sweet scent. “Sugarr or no, lass, ye’d best hear us. The fate o’ the bloody world’s at stake.”

Lola’s lips curved in a wry smile. “The fate of the world. That tired excuse again. You’ll forgive me if I don’t leap to serve. The last time the world demanded a sacrifice, I gave too much.”

“May we come inside?” Zelde asked gently, her voice calm as rain. “Your threshold seems... guarded.”

“Wise elf,” Lola murmured, stepping back. “Enter, then. If you must disturb my peace, do it without dripping mud on my floors.”

Inside, the cottage unfolded like a contradiction. The front hall opened into a vast chamber whose walls were lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, ladders perched to reach the higher tomes. The library was impossibly large, far bigger than the cottage appeared from outside, with galleries of oak shelves vanishing into shadows above. Strange globes of violet light floated between the stacks, illuminating books bound in leather, bark, or scales. Symbols in dozens of languages gleamed faintly along the spines. The smell of parchment and ink was thick, yet not unpleasant.

Beyond the library stretched the kitchen, warm and bright. A massive hearth dominated one wall, where the silver cauldron from earlier simmered quietly, its contents glowing with a shifting inner light. The counters were broad oak, covered with jars of herbs, pots of jam, bags of flour, bowls of fruit. Copper pans gleamed from hooks, and trays of fresh cupcakes cooled upon racks, their frosting swirling itself into delicate peaks as if painted by unseen hands. The air was rich with butter and spice, blending curiously with the faint ozone crackle of magic. A long oak table stood in the center, sturdy and scarred from centuries of use.

Naal removed her helm, setting it carefully by the door, and stood straight. “We were chosen because we are the best of our kind. Yet the Emperor’s seers say we cannot succeed without you. The Artefact lies beyond

tongues and spells we cannot master. Only you can open the path.”

Lola folded her arms, leaning lightly against the table. “And why should I care for your Emperor’s visions? Why should I leave my home, my peace, my kitchen, to bleed for crowns and thrones?”

Naal’s tone sharpened. “Because the Emperor commands it.” Lola’s laugh was brief, bitter. “Then tell your Emperor the stars obey no throne.” The air thickened until Zelde’s calm voice threaded between them: “The Artefact is not for crown or star—it is for the living. If we fall to quarrels before the road begins, we will never reach it.” Silence fell, but a silence weighted with truth.

Zelde stepped closer, her eyes moving over the library with both awe and understanding. “Because peace is not only his. If the Artefact is not found, war will spread. Not just to castles and cities—but here. To these shelves. To this table. To your door.”

Lola’s expression hardened. “I am not your soldier. I am no pawn of emperors. My power is mine alone.”

Naal’s tone cut like steel. “Refusal is not an option when the world itself is at stake.”

Belorin thumped her axe haft on the floor, startling a stack of books into wobbling. “And if ye won’t come, lass, they’ll send someone worse. Someone without yer manners. Someone who’ll drag ye in chains

instead of askin' polite." She sniffed the air. "And they'll not appreciate yer bakin', neither."

For the first time, Lola's lips twitched as if stifling a laugh. She brushed flour from her sleeve. "You think to win me with threats and with compliments to my cupcakes? Bold."

Zelde's voice softened further. "You hide here because you are afraid to feel. But you feel already, don't you? Every time a villager passes your door in fear. Every time you turn away from the cries in the night. Empathy is your gift, warlock—and your curse. The question is whether you will let it rot you, or let it guide you."

Even as she hesitated, a faint cry drifted in from the village lane—a child's cough, thin and ragged. Lola's head turned, and for a heartbeat her guard slipped. She closed her eyes, jaw tightening.

For a long moment, the only sound was the bubbling of the cauldron and the faint crackle of the hearth. Lola's violet-tinged fingers traced the edge of a cooling tray, her eyes far away. At last she exhaled, her voice low. "If I come, it will not be for your Emperor. Not for his visions. Not for his war. I will come for myself. And for those who cannot fight."

Naal inclined her head. "That will be enough."

Belorin grinned, teeth flashing. "By the stone, I knew ye had fire in ye after all. And flour."

Zelde's lips curved faintly, her eyes glimmering as though she had seen this choice long ago.

Lola gestured toward the table, where four steaming cups of tea poured themselves. "Then sit, and tell me everything. But wipe your boots first. Heroes or not, mud is unwelcome in my house."

As the others lifted their cups, Lola's violet eyes lingered on them with quiet calculation. She felt the thrum of the shard at her belt, the pendulum's faint tug. These three were not just guests—they were the beginning of something vast, a fellowship she had not sought but would not deny. Tomorrow, maps and omens would unfurl. Tonight, she measured their truths in tea and silence.

One by one, they sat at the great oak table beneath the weight of countless books and the scent of sugar and spice. And so, in a cottage at the edge of the valley, among cupcakes and cauldrons, the fellowship was forged—not by loyalty, nor by oath, but by necessity. And the journey into darkness had truly begun.



The Warlock's Table

The oak table creaked softly as four cups of steaming tea slid across its scarred surface, guided by unseen hands. The aroma of herbs and spice mingled with the sweet warmth of cooling cupcakes. For a moment, silence hung between the four figures seated around the table. Naal sat upright, gauntlets resting on the wood, her armor reflecting the glow of the hearth. Zelde's green cloak spilled around her chair, her bow propped within reach. Belorin lounged heavily, axe against her knee, already eyeing the cupcakes with

suspicion and hunger alike. Lola leaned on one arm, her violet-tinged skin catching the candlelight, her eyes sharp as blades yet betraying a glimmer of tired amusement.

At one point Belorin's hand crept toward the nearest cupcake. It halted an inch away as the tray slid neatly out of reach on its own. Lola's brow arched. Belorin grumbled, defeated but impressed.

It was Zelde who broke the silence first. "If we are to travel together, it would be best to know one another not as strangers. Titles weigh heavily on the tongue. I prefer names."

Lola's smile did not reach her eyes. She listened, but inwardly she measured the weight of each name like coins—wondering which would prove gold, which brass.

Naal inclined her head, the steel of her gaze softening slightly. "Then so be it. I am Naal, sworn to the Ancient Code. That oath is my life, but when we are together, call me nothing more than Naal."

Belorin grinned, her braids bristling. "Now that's a fine start. I'm Belorin, daughter of Clan Marrun. Ye'll not be catchin' me bowin' to fancy titles. Belorin'll do, or 'lass with the axe' if ye forget."

Zelde set her cup down gently. "I am Zelde of the forest folk, child of the glades, Seer of the Paths. But names are simpler than riddles. Call me Zelde."

All three turned their eyes toward Lola. She sat back in her chair, regarding them with cool amusement, as if measuring the worth of their words. Finally, she spoke. “The villagers whisper ‘warlock’ as if it were a curse. The temples speak my name only to warn their acolytes. But if we are to share bread and blood, you may call me Lola.”

A hush fell over them, heavier than before, until Belorin reached out and slapped her palm flat on the table. “Then it’s settled. No more ‘paladin this’ or ‘seer that’ or ‘warlock’ whispered like a bad dream. We’re Naal, Zelde, Belorin, and Lola. Four names, four blades, one road.”

Zelde tilted her head. “Still, Lola should know what binds us. The three of us were not strangers before the Emperor’s call. We met at the Academy, years ago, when we were still little more than children.”

Belorin cleared her throat. “Truth is, I mocked Naal for polishing her boots each dawn, but I never told her—I envied the way she never wavered.” Naal blinked, surprised, and for once she had no sharp reply.

Naal allowed herself a small smile, rare and fleeting. “The Code brought me there, though the masters doubted I would last. Too rigid, they said. Too fierce. Yet every trial, I endured. When I faltered, I found strength in those beside me.”

Belorin snorted. “And ye learned patience tryin’ to deal with me. I nearly broke the forgin’ halls hammerin’ steel too hard, and the climbin’ masters nearly fainted

when they saw me on the rope ladders. Couldn't get me feet to stop shakin'. But set me on the ground with an axe, and there wasn't a lad or lass could stand against me."

Zelde's lips curved faintly as she spoke, her voice calm. "I was an outsider there. The forest was my home, the stars my teachers. In marble halls, I was a curiosity. The others looked at me as if I were a shadow in daylight. But Naal treated me as an equal. And Belorin... well, Belorin taught me dwarves drink too much and snore too loud, but also that loyalty can be unshakable."

Belorin chuckled into her cup. "Aye, that I did."

Naal leaned forward. "In the Academy trials, when they set us against others, we learned what it meant to fight as one. Belorin broke their shields, Zelde struck before they could close, and I held the line until the last foe fell. Together, no one could best us. That is why we were chosen—not because of titles, but because of the bond forged in those days."

Lola listened in silence, eyes narrowing as if weighing truth against pride. "So you claim strength in unity. Bonds and oaths, forged in youth. But oaths can break. Friendships can wither."

Zelde met her gaze steadily. "And they can endure. We chose each other when the Empire only offered trials and hardship. That choice has not changed."