

Ni·fl·heim.

[ˈnifəl,hīm, ˈnivəl,hām]

DEFINITION

1. An underworld of eternal cold, darkness, and mist inhabited by those who died of old age or illness.

It began 494 years ago. The Earth split open and out poured darkness and wrath. Plague ravaged the people and the demons feasted. Three children, champions, were born to save what was left. Years have passed since their birth and the World has turned dark and desolate with little hope or life left. Childhoods were filled with training and conditioning and weapons. They were gifted animal companions at birth, each one specific to the children's mannerisms and personalities. Their village was wiped out in their twentieth year and training was over and the battle for the planet had begun. The battle for humanity.

The wind blows and my hair flaps around me like a dark cape, bringing the scent of death and making my blood boil. Merrick shifts under me and I rub her throat murmuring sounds more than words. We're close. I can sense their leader now and they leave a wave of corpses and black vegetation in their wake. "I will slaughter each and every one." Pippin growls in his deep, rumbling voice. I watch as Saul thrusts his spear in agreement and though I don't move or say anything, my heart speeds up in agreement and a chill sweeps over me. Closing my eyes, I send out a pulse and wait for the rebound then shift the reins and Merrick takes off with both mates following swiftly beside. A group of ten of our quarry are just beyond the rise to our East. The stench of death is deep in our lungs now and with it, that lingering sweetness at the back of the throat that always seems to follow the decayed. Pippin and Saul and their companions shift restlessly beside Merrick and I waiting for me to decide. Pulling my sword I grin, "Time to make ourselves known." We rise as one, the six of us. Our companions like a limb with us.

When we were born, our companions were born at the exact same moment as our first breath, marking us as the chosen. Swift and sure we ran towards our enemy with Pippin striking the head off the first sentry and Saul gutting the second before either got a warning out. Merrick and I spun through the air, striking off the heads of two unsuspecting soldiers. We kept moving forward. First it was four dead then eight

than all ten. We stood, surveying our work. Saul and his companion, spearing the hearts of our enemies to confirm their destruction. Not one of us were injured so we gathered what we wanted from the dead and headed east. The Demon King's power was a growing pressure at the base of my skull, guiding us towards our destiny.

We gather ourselves at the base of the knoll. Two knolls over, camped the enemy and our destiny. My mind was calm but had a constant pounding at the base of my skull. My feet were itchy for movement. My blood lusted for the kill as did Saul and Pippin and our companions. We could smell the death and decay, and all around us was despair. "Enough waiting Maloc. We must hit them now!" Pippin declared in his gruff voice. Saul nodded his agreement. For two days and nights I made us wait. The pounding at the base of my skull had lessened in the last evening, so I knew that I was ready to lead us into battle, but something was holding me back and I wasn't sure how to explain it. Pippin was ready to battle regardless of the outcome for all he cared about was dead and gone. Saul was Saul. I was never sure what was going on with him since he never spoke. Since this plague of death and destruction came upon us, I have fought. Knowing that everything I love and cherish and worship will be taken or is already gone. The three of us with our companions are the solution, only none of us are sure of the outcome. I pull my sword and the whisper of the release of the scabbard is like a melody. Calling my body into a dance few know. My companion and I rise with Saul and Pippin and their companions at our back. I send out a wave of pressure, signaling our coming. In an instant the enemy is up and surging towards us. Pippin lets out a guttural roar and he jumps on the back of his companion and they crash into the first throng of enemies slashing heads and limbs at random. Saul grins at me and launches himself onto his companion and follows Pippin in. War is brutal, but it has its beautiful moments. Merrick and I walk the path they have plowed for us, killing anything that moved still. The Demon King was bashing his power at me, trying to break in but my mind was sealed from him. We kept pushing through. Slaying our enemies all around us. Saul grinning from ear to ear as he sliced through whatever stood in front of him and his companion clawing away gleefully at any he missed. She ate the head of one and the heart of another, roaring in triumph. Pippin and his companion, thundering through pack after pack of clustered enemies shredding flesh from bones and severing limbs from bodies. It was a glorious battle from my eyes and my blood was raging with lust. Lust for blood and vengeance for all lost to the plague of evil. This plague of death and despair. Most of the enemy has avoided me but a few have had the courage. I struck them down without blinking and sent pulse after pulse towards my true battle. The Lord Commander, as he was calling himself.

He stood behind twelve men. Eyes blood red, boring into mine. I could feel him pushing against my mind, trying to find a weak spot. I smiled. "You cannot break me, Demon. These knights of yours will die and then you too, will die." The Demon King laughed and I could feel it deep in the unknown places of my soul. It hurt.

"Everything you know, everything you love has been destroyed, Savior. There is nothing left for you and your men to save." Merrick stomps her feet and snarls. Placing my hand on her neck, I shake my head, "You are wrong and talking is done."

I send out a pulse and watch him stagger as I sever the heads of his twelve. I waved one hand low, signaling to Merrick to wait and I jumped the last couple of feet with my sword held high. Bringing it down to clash with his sword as he swung around at the last moment. Our blades spark and he tosses me away but not down. His face broke into a scowl, "I will enjoy carving your heart out, Savior." He lunges forward with a side swipe and I feel the blade whisk by as I jump back. I push a little into his head, making him shudder and stumble but I feel him push back as I bring my sword around with a slice to his gut. I felt the tip of my blade make contact before he skipped back. A slight scratch marred his chest plate. He snarled at me and lunged then brought his sword up and around, trying to take my head. I skipped, twisted and ducked while slicing deep across his thigh and stabbing two quick little jabs into his side under his arm. He stumbled back, then arched back and howled deep into the air and a roar responded while the ground shook. Behind him appeared a dog like creature, taller and broader than the demon. It snarled in our direction and I felt Merrick shiver in anticipation. I could feel her joy at finally being able to join this particular fight. She stood tall and stomped her feet, huffing in the dogs direction. I briefly wondered how Saul and Pippin were doing but knowing they would slaughter all in their path and complete their destiny so I could complete mine to make the World balance again.

He brought his sword down as I stepped away, slicing into the back of my calf and making me stumble a bit. Thrusting up, I quickly pivoted on my good leg and knocked the demon in his chin as he was moving down with a swift chop. Off to my left, I could hear Merrick clashing with the dog. I grinned in satisfaction as the dog let out a tremendous yelp and I felt the sprinkle of warm blood on my cheek. Holding my wounded leg in tight and putting light pressure on the toes, I balanced my weight onto my good leg preparing for my next attack. The Demon King was panting hard and hammering away at my mind but it only felt like a soft breeze was tickling. "Why do you bother?" I asked. "I can feel you pushing for a way in but it is a wasted effort on your part. You should save your strength for the rest of our dance. I promise the song is almost ending." I twirl myself toward him with my hilt tucked close and my blade straight out, razor sharp. I feel it slice into his arms as he brings them up too slowly and hear him scream as my blade slices deep into his back. He goes down howling as his essence leaves my mind and I push twice as hard with mine and grinned in satisfaction as he falls forward, head smashing off the ground. Standing over him I jab the tip of my sword into his neck, holding him in place as I ravage his mind. He has the key I need to complete my destiny.

I was not prepared for the hellish nightmare that was the Demon King's mind. I held strong as I bashed and slinked my way through the death and gore and lustful thoughts of this torturous mind. The perversions almost brought me down but at the final moment, when I was sure my mind would burn to dust, I broke through into the center and found the key. It was not what I expected. I could not really see it only feel it, deep in my being. Something just slid into place, the proverbial key into lock clicking. All my senses exploded. I felt the exhaustion fade away and my body and mind became stronger. I felt the strength travel down my link with Merrick and watched as she stood taller. As my thoughts turned to Saul and Pippin and their companions, I felt the energy inside me drift out and surround them. Any wounds

they had healed and they stood taller and broader and let out ferocious battle cries. They flew like lightning and tore down the remaining army in the blink of an eye. Saul and Pippin stood beside their companions breathing heavy, looking at Merrick and me like we are gods. I twirl and slice off the head of the Demon King, strapping it to my belt and begin heading east once again. I hear Pippin and Saul follow and I smile and listen to the rhythm pulsing from my center as it guides us to the end of our quest.

We made it two days when Pippin walking into a wall. I had had no sense of anything ahead of us but when he walked full into it, a light so bright blinded us all for three hours. Saul was pacing back and forth and scowling while Pippin ranted and paced. I sat with my eyes closed and searched myself for the answer out of this. The wall stretched miles in either direction and I wondered why it was put here and by whom. Our companions sat together huffing and purring and growling at each other. Suddenly I could understand them. I placed my hand on her mane and she locks her eyes with mine. I must have thought about being able to understand them because she was suddenly clear in my head. "You have always understood me but it is good that you finally hear us all." They all bob their heads. "Do you know what must be done to cross this wall?" I asked. Merrick ruffles her mane, "Carper has an idea." Carper is Saul's companion and he is all scale and tail and just as mysterious as Saul. Making eye contact with Carper is like staring at the sun, blinding but warm. "Blood." His voice, like gravel over a metal grate, rumbles through my head painfully. He closes his eyes and starts snoring and Saul joins him about ten minutes later. Pippin was still pacing but his ranting was down to a low grumble while his companion tracked his movement with her eyes. Merrick sat still as a sphinx with her steady gaze on me while I tossed around Carper's clue.

We stand in front of the wall. Myself. Pippin and Saul. We each grip our ceremonial daggers in our left hand, preparing for the deep slice into our right palms to smear our blood across the wall. I tossed Carper's clue around for a while before waking Saul and hauling both him and Pippin over and explaining the idea. The key inside me sings low and steady with a melodic hum, so I relax and let it flow through me and into my friends and our companions. It is like breathing in sunshine. I bring my dagger up quick and slice deep and smooth while Pippin and Saul duplicate my motions exact. As one, we smear our blood into a huge circle while our companions start a strange chant that only I can hear. The wall lights up and blinds us and we listen as it cracks and splinters. The light dies out and our vision returns.

Directly in front of us the wall has split into a six foot wide crack and in heads Pippin with no fear in sight. Saul looks over at me with a grin and motions Carper over and then heads in after Pippin while his companion scurries after. Merrick nudges my shoulder and I start walking with the key vibrating inside me as I cross the wall. I stumble a bit but the vibration soon passes and the key resumes its steady hum creating a warmth throughout my body and beyond.

A few hours this side of the wall, I notice a slight shift in the air and the brimstone smell becomes more potent. The six of us stand in a circle and the three of us draw our swords. Something is coming. Merrick kept saying she could smell it on the wind. The smell was neither good nor bad and she could only describe it as

nothing. If nothing had a scent, she said, this would be what it would smell like. All three companions were agitated and then suddenly everything was still. Everything but me. It felt like I was underwater. Heavy, thick air surrounded me and the bell inside shifted in resonance. Then a voice spoke from everywhere and nowhere. *"Welcome champion."* It smothered my senses and made me queasy but I didn't respond. *"I have been waiting awhile for you to show up. The others are unimportant but you have what I need."* I smirked, "And what is it that I have?" *"The key. What you carry deep inside your center will restore balance to this World and bring about a new beginning."* I contemplated what the voice was telling me. From the moment I and my friends, my brothers in arms, were brought into the World, we were told that together we would bring the end to all of the suffering throughout the lands. Deep inside my soul I can feel the pulse of the key and the connection it brings me of everything. Even now in the stillness of this spell the voice has captured us in. I could feel the life of my comrades and companions and knew they were still alive and well just frozen in time. I did not doubt that whatever had its hold on us was infinitely more powerful than I, but I also knew that what it told me was half a truth and half a lie. I know the key will help save us all but I also know that in order to accomplish my destiny, I need my companions and my brothers and together, the six of us will end this Hell on the World and birth a new life. "You tell me half-truths demon. I know what must be done and you and your kind will perish." I dug deep and pulled all I could from the power settled in my center and broke us free of his time freeze spell and we continued walking. Saul and Pippin and their companions none the wiser but Merrick gave me a deep stare letting me know she knew something had happened but wasn't sure on what. I gave her a reassuring rub and we followed our friends.

What has felt like days, has only been hours but the forest we walk through is dense and humid and dark. Incessant buzzing following our body heat as we move quietly along the path we chose and bright beady eyes peeking out at us from the foliage above. The steady hum throughout my body had begun to change in pitch. I wasn't sure what to make of it but I hoped it signified our destination. Pippin stopped suddenly on the path and drew his sword with Saul beside him not a minute later. I stood beside Merrick and waited. A strange hiss came out of the dark and a rustle of bushes revealed a squat, long bodied, reptilian type creature with bright yellow eyes. It waved its head back and forth while darting its tongue in and out, tasting the air. Saul stepped back and sheathed his sword and gestured to Pippin to proceed which he did with one swipe. The head rolled to my feet and as I looked down at it, it disintegrated and two heads grew anew on the body. Saul started laughing as Pippin gawked for a second and then went to chop off the two new heads. "Stop." I said it without even realizing I was going to say it but he stopped and looked at me as did the reptile. "If you chop off these heads, more will obviously come." The reptile hissed in agreement bringing a smile to my lips. It took the opportunity to lunge at Pippin but he was too quick and ducked in time, coming up with a slice to the legs and a deep plunge into the creature's back, it let out a low hiss and disintegrated. "What the hell was that thing?" Pippin asked while he wiped down his blade, not really expecting an answer from anyone, which was good considering I had no idea what it was and by the look of wonder on Saul's face, he

didn't either. We continued on. More on alert than before and the buzzing had changed pitch. It was more of a vibration now and I felt a tug in my gut, which made me feel queasy but my feet didn't stop. I felt Merrick breathing over my shoulder and centered myself on her essence. A vision gripped me and I dropped to the moist ground. A giant tree surrounded by decaying corpses with a great serpent wrapped around it all, burned into his eyes and he cried out in pain. Then it was over and my breathing was laboured. I whispered, "NidHogg arises" and passed out. It would be many hours later until I woke and when I did, it was even darker than before and there was a prominent odour of death in the air.

The flames of the fire greeted my tired eyes when they finally opened. Saul sat across from me with his eyes closed, legs crossed and hands held in the center of his lap. I shifted my gaze and it landed on Pippin who was glaring into the fire. "Share your thoughts Pip." His intense stare locked on mine, "what happened?" I groaned as I shifted into a sitting position. Merrick chirped at me and I sent her a quick smile. "I had a vision. The Tree of Life blazed in my eyes with a world of corpses buried beneath and around it. The great Serpent, NidHogg was wrapped around the tree slowly devouring it." Saul whispered "*Malice Striker.*" The vibration in my core was settled at a steady pitch and something far off was resonating with it, tugging at my center. I reached for my water pack and Saul handed me some salted meat. Merrick shuffled closer and rested her head beside my lap. I sank my hand into her mane and felt her pulse, steady and strong beneath my palm. Secure, safe, trust, loving. She poured her feelings into my being and I drank them in greedily, like a starving child. I felt my sword hum at my other side and scanned the trees around us. The dance of Death was coming and we ached for the beauty of it all. Pippin was staring at me still so I stared back. "How can that be?" I waited to see if he had more to say or ask but after a few minutes I responded. "You ask that question after all we've seen and conquered? After the life we and those before us and before them have lived? Do I need to remind you of what happened 494 years ago?" He glowered at me and went pink in the cheeks. "I realize my question was ill phrased but that does not negate the fact that hearing of childhood stories come to life is hard to believe." Saul laughed, "We have been living in a horror world since birth Pip, what he says should not surprise you. I have had dreams about the Malice Striker for as long as I can remember. I am surprised to find out that you have not." Pippin and I stared at Saul. It had been months since he had uttered that long of a sentence and I think we were in slight shock, but I quickly recovered and placed my hand on Pippin's shoulder, "What have your dreams consisted of brother?" He stood and started pacing. Saul and I locked eyes and then watched as Pip gathered his thoughts. "I use to dream about riding Nida deep in the mountains and through towns and villages that we were told stories about. All I dream about now is blood and my axe and my sword." His shoulders sagged and he looked defeated. The spark in his eyes dimmed a little so I sent out a wave of power to bolster him. Saul felt it too and they both looked at me. "Doesn't that exhaust you?" Pippin asked. I shook my head, "No. It actually makes me feel whole and content. It makes me realize that we are all connected. This World we stand on and live on and everything natural on and in it. I send out my power, I can see it

flowing and wrapping and intertwining amongst everything and it fills me up. My Body feels stronger and more agile while my soul feels complete.” Pip furrowed his brow, “Does that mean we’re soul mates?” Saul burst out laughing as did Pippin. I cracked a smile, “I guess it does.” I lifted my blade to them and them to me and our companions came to sit behind each of us. The air went still, the flames dropped to glowing embers and the clouds let the moon shine down. “Far-wander grant us wisdom, courage and victory. Grant us strength and protection.” The words had just come to me and I felt them surge up from deep inside and they dragged out a torrent of power. I felt it shoot up my arm and into my sword and then spread out. I could tell when everyone else felt it shoot into them. We were all glowing. Our companions stood and I felt Merrick shake out her mane and felt the pull of her roar from my gut seconds before she let it out into the air. Nida stomped and snorted and I could feel her strength surround us all while Carper exhaled a blue and white breath that obviated what was left of the forest we were camped near. Then the fire gathered its height again and the air sighed around us and picked up the ashes of the forest and carried them away. We sheathed our swords again and settled in for the break of dawn, none of us sleeping.

I felt the ground tremble before I heard the snarls and hoots. I smelt the stench of death seconds later as we all got to our feet and gathered our weapons. The six of us walked to the top of our knoll and took in the mass of vile looking demons and dark creatures in the valley before us. The valley of Hel. I didn’t even have to try to focus my power, it just blazed out of me and in a wave, and it took out the first row of demons in a blink. NidHogg let out a roar and Merrick replied in kind. Pippin, Saul and I mounted our companions and charged forward. Saul and Carper took to the sky and blazed a circle around the enemy’s army. I watched as those that tried to escape disappeared into piles of ashes and the rest quickly understood to bunch up or burn. Pippin and Nida crashed and stomped their way through anything that tried to get past or attack them. Merrick carried me towards NidHogg who stood waiting with four minions. He let out another roar and I could feel Merrick growling in response. One of the minions jumped up and flew at me, trying to get me off of Merrick but I sliced his head off in one swipe of my sword. A second one tried to take out Merrick’s flank but her razor tipped tail, whipped out and sliced him in two. The last two minions crowded close to NidHogg who seemed to get larger with every step Merrick and I took towards him, until suddenly they were gone and NidHogg let out a blast of fire that burned a trench into the already scorched and scarred ground. Demons climbed up from the trench, born from the fire and shrieking in ecstasy. Corpses clawed their way out behind the demons, groaning in agony as they dragged pieces of themselves forward out of the trench. NidHogg let out another roar and started stomping through his newly risen demons and snatching the corpses up and eating them as he stormed towards me. I caught sight of Pippin and Saul carving their way through the Malice Strikers army with ease and smiled. I felt in my core that we would win this fight. That with our win, we would set the scales back to balance and life would renew and thrive from the ashes of what we do here. On this day and at this hour of battle. The power inside me grew up, strong

and bright and burst out of all of me, surrounding Merrick and I in a shield of majik just as NidHogg released a stream of fire at us. It enveloped the shield and then burnt out and I jumped from Merrick's back sailing through the air with my sword at the ready. I strike down with only a glancing blow and land in a roll with Merrick following up with a swipe of her claws to his throat. She drew blood but it was superficial and she got caught with his tail that sent her tumbling back a few yards. I growled and ran at him, using my inner power and sword and I sliced at his gut and sent a blast of power with it. The blade cut his stomach to the muscle and the power blasted it wide open. NidHogg stumbled but kept advancing as the wound quickly healed. I tossed a couple smaller knives and they reached their mark, only to be absorbed and disappear. NidHogg let out another blast of fire and I felt my skin start to peel a second before my shield went up again, seemingly of its own will. Suddenly I knew. This power inside of me was its own entity. It needed my total acceptance of self to work completely. I breathed in deep as he stalked around me. Listening intently to my inner voice, I felt my body start to tingle and my hands heat up. My sword became lighter than air and felt more like me than ever before. It sang a ferocious battle song and I felt the pull of the dance I longed for. The dance I was made for. The dance that would end this horror of a World and bring back the light. I clasped both hands on the hilt and sent out tendrils of power to those I loved. Using their essence to strengthen mine own, I locked eyes with Malice Striker and his glowed with hatred and lust of blood and we crashed into each other in a flurry of majik and blood. A black cloud enclosed us as I slashed and stabbed and blasted him with as much of my power as I could. His body healed but with the more wounds I inflicted at one time repeatedly, his healing ability couldn't keep up and his wounds started to seep. He clawed and bit at me and where I wasn't fast enough to protect myself, I lost chunks of flesh to him. I felt my strength waning when a burst of golden fur latched herself onto his back. With all four of her giant paws dug in to his scaly back, Merrick roared and bit down, ripping the back of NidHogg's neck off. He managed to shake her off and she went flying through the air and out of the dark cloud. I took my sword and jammed it into his right eye up to the hilt and grabbed my two remaining daggers and cross sliced the rest of his neck off. He dropped dead at my feet and I dropped to my knees with blood dripping from everywhere. I felt the power dim out inside of me and I sagged the rest of the way to the ground. I could still hear Saul and Pippin roaring and their swords singing as they clashed with the enemies. I could feel the grounds rumble as Nida ran through the remaining crowds of demons stomping them to pulp. Carper ripped heads off and swallowed them up and soon all I heard was the silence of death and felt, through a faint pulse inside me, my friends life forces steady and strong. As I closed my eyes I felt the earth stir to life once again and I smiled. We had done it. The World will rebirth and life will begin once again. The breath left my body and I watched from afar as my friends gathered my remains and gave me a warrior's burial. Merrick was at my side and together we faded into eternity.