

Chapter 5



Rafa

The waves of the Kudon Sea splashed onto the deck as the helpless ship rocked back and forth, moments away from capsizing with every hurling surge. And there was Rafa—fighting the battle of the sea, doing whatever necessary for his crew to survive the onslaught of the below. He felt that fear, a familiar feeling he deeply despised more than anything, yet today was not the day for it to consume him.

He had journeyed to the center of the sea for one purpose: a rumor. A rumor that the ancient beast, who was born from the darkness, had emerged from its hiding. Ever since Rafa could remember in his sixteen years of life, he knew his existence was meant to be extraordinary, and he was made for extraordinary moments. Something remarkable was bound to occur; it was in his Toco blood. One day, all Neshama would sing the stories, and proclaim "Rafa slew the beast! The great Leviathan of the sea! Our Hero has taken his place... In the halls of eternity!" Heroic tales would be told of his gleaming chiseled muscle, his hunger for adventures, and his endless fights escaping the reaching hand of death. "The youngest son of Wisdom has brought back the teeth of the beast! His sword is mighty! Rafa the Brave!" Rafa smirked to himself as his moment began.

The waves thumped his one-of-a-kind war ship as he shouted and commanded his crew. "Westward! I think I can see its tail! We are so close!"

The wooden ship shifted on command as the boat redirected towards what Rafa perceived to be the scales of the Leviathan, the monster that came from the heart of the sea. All his years, training, sailing, and seeking had led to his final test. Suddenly in the distance, in the deep blue, he saw hundreds of teeth like swords emerging from the water accompanying those scaly fins. He was right, nothing in all the creation had teeth like that. It had to be the beast.

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"Turn the ship around!" Rafa yelled, knowing his best chance to slay the creature was its deep black eye, its only weakness. He needed to get into the right alignment, as he would only have a quick moment to launch his spear. As the boat shifted according to Rafa's orders, the Leviathan's colossal tail, longer than his boat itself, flung above Rafa's eyes and ripped off the ship's sail, scattering the mast into the dark sea. The roar of the beast was unlike anything he had ever heard, like a thunderous avalanche of many waters. Their hope to return home was now lost, but Rafa couldn't look back, he could not fear. He was ready to shine.

Rafa shouted to his crew as the rain poured down from the heavens, "Stay steady, this is our only chance!"

His crew, though startled, heeded their leader's words, and fought to control the oars. They respected their captain too much to give up now. He had taught them bravery and courage, and time led them to trust his leadership. With their resilience and excellent control of the acacia ship, Rafa was given his one shot at launching the spear into the beast's head.

Finally, the positioning was perfect and there Rafa was, face-to-face with his foe. Thousands of teeth arose out of the water, ready to devour all Rafa had worked towards. The Leviathan stretched its mouth fully open as Rafa stared into the deep, dark abyss, a pitch-black tunnel towards death. He felt a fear like he had never felt before, but inside him, a fire began to kindle. Rafa thought of his family, the ancestors of the past, and the nation of Neshama. He looked at the end of his spear. It was sharp enough to impale a man through his heart with a simple poke, but a Leviathan's skin was tougher to penetrate than bronze armor. He only had one option: that eye, and it was open.

He swiftly grabbed the fishing spear from the deck, but as he made eye contact with the creature, Rafa froze. Its eyes were a dark abyss like an enchanting spell from a sorcerer. They were deeper than the ocean, a darkness Rafa had never seen before. But he knew that a few seconds more of this immobility, and he would be swallowed up forever.

Rafa focused and broke the spell and regained his whereabouts after feeling unconscious for what felt like an eternity. From out of this trance, he was ready to make history. He knew he had one chance to win. And so, he did. Quickly running to the stern's edge, Rafa leaped off the boat. Flying into the air like a story of old, he hurled the spear towards the Leviathan's eye. With pure joy, he saw his spear strike the dead center of his target. The beast was no more, as it sank slowly to the bottom of the ocean. Yet, Rafa floated down with him.

Rafa slowly descended into the water with his last smile, as a distant voice began to shout his name. The voice became louder and louder, like a chant for his victory. He opened his eyes only to see his teacher staring at him in anger as Rafa awoke from his sleep.

"Rafa, you are napping again." His teacher exclaimed, as Rafa slowly geared his mind back to reality.

"I'm not! I'm listening. I understand our country's history better than anyone here!" Rafa defended his obvious guilt.

"Rafa, we are currently discussing the ancient literature of Emul." Once again, the sarcasm caught Rafa off guard. Slight chuckles began to fill the outdoor arena where they met each week, near the Villages of Wisdom.

"History, literature... I know all of that! You always have so many questions for us students, teacher! Well can you answer mine? Why haven't we had a proper wheat harvest in the last ten years?"

"Improper irrigation techniques. This is common knowledge from all the wordsmiths." The professor annoyingly answered Rafa's question, waiting for a moment to end this pointless conversation.

"Ha! That's not correct. We've had a proper wheat harvest, but since there are famines in the eastern regions, we have been generous in sending aid to their tribes. You see, my father told us this and said that this was hidden from the people of Neshama because they didn't need to deal with state affairs. He said the people had plenty here, and the extra was for the

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ministries bidding." Rafa's quick-paced words slowed progressively, once again catching himself in his trap.

"Sounds like something of state affairs that shouldn't be shared. Interesting. I couldn't imagine what would happen if someone were to share that with a civilian. They might be enraged by the lack of bread in their diet, maybe start a civil war, and then demand that their meals consist of fish, fruits, sugar, oats, and bread." His teacher replied with a grin.

"Well..." Rafa was at a loss for words for the second time in two weeks. These trespasses against him would require revenge one day. *Maybe I can take a sparring sword and "accidentally" hit my teacher in the leg as we are practicing? Or I could use a real sword.* Rafa's dark thoughts were halted by his father's voice in his head. *A royal mind has no time for revenge. A royal mind focuses on what is righteous and true. A royal mind consumes itself with light, and so reproduces it.*

"A royal mind also has no time for fun," Rafa spoke aloud as his classmates looked at him in confusion, and he realized his mouth had spewed one of his thoughts.

His old teacher glared. Even though his face was intimidating, Rafa was not worried about it in the slightest. He knew that his teacher would not give Rafa the least form of punishment. Since the funeral of Wisdom, his classmates and teachers began to treat him slightly differently. They may not have noticed, but he did. He felt like he could murder someone, and the nation's people would just respond, "Oh, he is just in a tough time because of his father. We will pardon him."

The last request on Rafa's mind was to be treated as a weak victim, stuck in agony because of a tragic situation. He was fine. He was sad that Wisdom, his hero and father left his family, but that was no excuse not to be strong. Yes, he did have moments where he felt paralyzed and harbored grief beyond comprehension. But if his father had taught him anything, it was that life will try to conquer you, but you must beat it. And that was

precisely what Rafa planned on doing. He reflected on taking this tragedy and thought of his triumphant story.

What a beautiful redemptive story this shall be! Though his father died at a young age, Rafa overcame this obstacle. He then became the strongest warrior in the world; he sailed to the Empires, rescued the love of his life or something, became the leader of Neshama, and finally, a world leader. All because a simple tragedy thought it could overcome his destiny. Rafa rules the creation! The narrative in his mind gave him the feeling of winning a war, as he sat in the open-air classroom.

As class carried on, and his teacher continued to speak on unimportant matters, Rafa began to feel ill about his dream. It was both a triumph and a nightmare. His body felt the fear of the sea. He felt the looming of the deep. A fear that had plagued him for many years.

When Rafa was a child, the ocean would call his name. It was his obsession. At age four, he dove headfirst from a twenty-foot cliff into the sea to save the dolphins he saw "drowning" in the water. This was Rafa. After his efforts failed, his mother explained the nature of dolphins and how the sea was their home, so he decided it would be his, too.

He recalled memories with his mother learning about the ocean and falling in love with its depth and expanse, but as he grew older, his love for the sea shifted to a fear of it. Considering the blue monster seized his mother so many years ago, he constantly felt haunted. Beyond his mother's exile, there was the moment. The moment that redefined his destiny when he was a child, a fleeting memory he chose to ignore, but couldn't help think about when he saw the Kudon. A deep moment of fear. So, in exchange for this thievery, Rafa clung to his sword.

Avoiding his thoughts, Rafa leaned over to his friend, "I'm just ready to get out of here and spar! This is terrible!" He laughed, and Clement chuckled. As class continued, he grew hungrier and hungrier to have a blade in his hand. Well, a dull blade, but a blade, nonetheless.

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And the day continued, with an apathetic Rafa coasting through his studies. In economics, the teacher rambled about the high taxes being placed on fish in the Empires and how that hurt the poor, but Rafa stayed silent and saw his sword gleaming in his mind's eye. In astronomy, they discussed how to interpret the prophecies found in the constellations, but Rafa dozed off before he heard anything of interest.

As this long, aggravating day dragged on, he thought of all the important things he should be doing instead of learning about these trivial matters. He thought of asking Daniel prying questions, pestering Ezzy, preparing speeches as a future general, and of course, strategy to win duels with his sword. And after a few more hours, finally, the best part of the day that he had been longing for had arrived—sparring class.

Rafa had many dreams and being the most astonishing swordsman in Neshama was at the top of the list. He always awaited the day when his name would be called to the Temple of Strength for the Tournament of Strength. Though he was underage and most of those warriors were ten years older than him, Rafa was past confident that he could effortlessly win the title. The elder Neshamans may have had an additional fifty pounds of weight, but they lacked the grace and skill that put Rafa above all his adversaries.

As his treasury class ended, he sprinted to the practice fields to be the first with his hand on a sword, per usual. While Rafa was swinging his sword and practicing his defensive positions, his two friends, Clement and Anem, slowly approached him, drawing their swords, as they knew better than to be defenseless around a wielded Rafa.

"Brothers! What a fine day it is. Too bad, you'll be leaving this place without any dignity. And that's a shame! You could use that later to find yourself a wife!" Rafa laughed.

"Rafa, we don't want to fight right now. You know we don't stand a chance." Clement pleaded as Rafa took a step closer towards them.

"Yeah, you could single-handedly take us both out, with your left hand." Anem stated as Rafa switched his sword to the commanded, weaker hand. "I mean, you have done it plenty of times. Aren't you bored of beating us?"

This was no falsehood, as Rafa had done this before to plenty of his classmates. Because of his years of beatings from his brothers, it was impossible for anyone his age to defeat him.

"Well, my brothers won't spar with me anymore because they're afraid. My trainer stopped training me because I am quote 'unteachable'. Well, I was just better than him, and he used that as an excuse. And I don't see any Caly soldiers to defend this land against, so you guys are my best option!"

"He didn't train you because you wouldn't listen! That's what the wordsmiths say." Anem sneered.

"Who cares about the wordsmiths? They are liars! I didn't listen because he was teaching me in the old traditions. Those won't work in modern combat. We fight with bronze now, not stone." Rafa rebutted.

"Well, if you master the basics, then you can build from there, Rafa. A strong foundation, just like our nation. We are good at the simple things, and because of that, we are great!" Clement chimed in with a slight tone, as if he bested Rafa.

"I refuse to take advice from a couple of weaklings that I can beat with my left hand!" Rafa stated in exuberance. Rafa drew his sword, and calmly stated, "Let's go."

And so, the onslaught began. Rafa started with a simple sweep at Anem's leg as Anem dodged it immediately, but lost footing as he did. Clement then lunged at Rafa's torso with his sword, which Rafa directly and simply avoided with a basic hip movement. Rafa continued the spectacle as he kicked Clément's sword playfully out of the way, causing Clement to chase it in anger. The attacks on Rafa continued as he patiently read every move his friends would perform. Before Anem or Clement could think of an

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attack, Rafa knew precisely what they would try. It was a perfectly executed fight, just like a dance, with each step connected to his increasing heartbeat.

When Rafa grew bored of training his defenses, he took his sword and, with a quick arm thrust, threw it in the air as high as possible. Anem and Clement looked and stared at the flying sword, only to realize Rafa had wedged himself between them, stolen Clement's blade, and knocked Anem's sword out of his hand. Rafa then hit them both in their stomachs with Clement's sparring sword as hard as he could, knocking the wind out of them and causing them to grimace in pain lying on the ground.

"Why did you do that!?" Clement said in agony.

"Why did you ignore the fighter and focus on the weapon? Something like that should not go unpunished! The swordsman is more dangerous than the sword." River had taught Rafa this lesson in a similar fashion. When Rafa was just ten years of age, he took his life's worst beating with this move, and Rafa had never forgotten it. River was his rival.

"The swordsman can't kill you, only the weapon," Anem challenged.

"What if I kill you right now with my hands?" Rafa fought back.

"You wouldn't have it in you to kill anyone, Rafa. You're all talk." Clement added.

"For now..." Rafa replied in slight anger. One day he would show these kids he was a true warrior, a hero the legends spoke about.

As the excitement had finished and Rafa made amends with his bruised companions, they strolled down to the Docks of Strength for a final glimpse of the sunset by the sea. They quickly ran through the center of Rousha as the crowded streets were filled with people returning home from the day's work. As they approached the docks and all three were out of breath from their long jog, Clement spoke up.

"How big do you think this sea is?" Clement questioned, as he was critically thinking about navigating such a feat.

"Well, we know we have two hundred miles until Cordia, and two hundred miles south of that we have the Emul Empire," Anem stated. "So, if we go east from Cordia for four hundred miles, we arrive at Calypso, and west two hundred miles leads us to the Temn Islands."

"Out of all those places, where would you want to live?" Clement asked to continue the conversation. His friends always lived in this world of pondering thoughts like priests of Wisdom.

"I would say the Temn islands have a very high value for intelligence, and their navy is second to none. King Flora is turning that nation into, maybe, the most powerful empire in the creation. They are creative and strong, and that is something I admire about them." Anem said. "Plus, they have been our closest allies, closer than anyone else. Rafa's dad had an amazing relationship with King Flora, and we benefit from that relationship."

"As in, they don't attack us?" Clement snickered.

"Well, yes. That is quite the benefit to possess for a kingdom that is constantly growing in power like they are. But I don't think Flora has it in him to try to expand and take over the entire creation. He seems more peaceful than that." Anem laughed.

Rafa listened to his friends' ramble on as he stared at the sea. The shallow crystal-clear waters of the bay brought him peace, these famous teal waters of Neshama. He was reminded of his childhood and swimming with the fish. But as his eyes pushed further, he felt his heartbeat race, looking at the waves in the distance. The rocky waters and deep dark unknown of the violent Kudon sea beyond the bay began to make him uneasy.

"What about you, Rafa?" Clement asked, as Rafa refocused to answer his question.

"Calypso, dude! They are true warriors. No army has been able to beat them in a battle in generations. They also have a mighty navy. If it weren't for dad's negotiation skills, we would have been ransacked and destroyed years ago by their might. I have heard stories of their cities—filled with so

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much gold that they use it to pave the streets! What strength! It seems like a place filled with riches, warriors, and not to mention beautiful girls. Everything a man could ask for!"

Clement laughed. "Sometimes, you act ten years older than your age. With all this talk of riches and glory, it sounds like you have skipped over being a teenager and jumped straight into adulthood. I'll find you a wife this week, and you can get married and have kids by next spring! Sounds amazing, huh?"

"I don't want any of that." Rafa said seriously. "My dreams are bigger than all of that. I want to be *fire*. If I end my days stuck in this nation with a wife and kids, I will look back and consider my life an utter disappointment. I have enough problems with Ezzy around. Women are too difficult."

"She is a handful." Clement stated.

"Hey, shut up! Ezzy is amazing! Yeah, she knows every way to exploit my anger, she constantly is defending herself for the wrong she does, and she is insufferable. I mean, she recently told Daniel that I stole some apples from a local vendor, and that I said since I was 'Wisdom's Son', it was acceptable. The truth was that I borrowed some apples from a vendor and planned on paying him back sometime in the next ten years. I said I was Wisdom's son so that the vendor would believe him that I would pay him back! Brilliant really! I would, but in my timing!"

"And...?" Clement asked.

"And what?" Rafa exclaimed.

"It sounded like you were defending her, but then you just complained about her." Anem laughed.

"Oh, right. Yeah, Ezzy is amazing! Brilliant really. Evil kind of. Not really the nice 'Caretaker of Animals'. But she is. But she really is an animal. There's a lioness inside of Ezzy, and through my 'skills', I mean to awaken that side of her, whether that is through positive or negative reinforcement!" Rafa spoke as he even confused himself. His friends looked on with the same joyful confusion.

“So, you are going to keep annoying her for fun?” Clement asked.

“Well, yes. She’s a Toco! And currently too comfortable.” Rafa replied quickly.

"I have no idea what you want, Rafa. You confuse me." probed Anem.

"I want the world to see my life and believe there is something more for them than they realize! I want a statue outside the Temple of Strength, so as children walk by it, they can ask their parents who that is, and they will reply, 'That was Rafa, the Invincible. He outshined the rest of the nation and brought glory to his father and us.' I want people to know they can be greater, just like me." Rafa expressed with all his passion as he sat down and watched the waves hit the rocky shore next to the city port center.

As silence emerged at the end of Rafa’s sentence, a numbness ran all over his body. He thought of his father as he gazed again at the Kudon waves far from the shore. His father was indeed everything he aspired to become. Wisdom was a warrior, a visionary, and now gone. These thoughts of his father haunted him daily and left him tossing and turning nightly.

Seeing the mood shift on Rafa's face, Anem stated, "One day we will all look at you, and you will show us that anything is possible. I guarantee it. You will make your father proud. I mean, you are just like him. Ambitious, brave, smart. I mean, you don't really look like him, but you have the same spirit. You are like a lighter version of him!"

Rafa's heart began to feel soft, and a slight amount of salty liquid started to gather in his eyes before he interrupted his emotions. He thought of his similarities, but there was one difference Anem lied about—his smarts. No one was as smart as Wisdom. And Rafa’s below average studies show that to be beyond true in his case. Distracting himself from the deep thoughts, he exclaimed, "Let's grab a boat and go out in the bay!"

"All the fishermen are out there, Rafa. These aren't open waters at all. We would be stuck trying to dodge people while they work." Clement said.

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"That sounds like a brilliant plan! Let's see how close we can get to the fishing crews before they begin to yell at us. We can even steal a fish or two from them just to see their response!" laughed Rafa.

Rafa sprinted his way towards the docks while Clement and Anem chased far behind. He looked and spotted a perfectly sized fishing boat that he could jump into without hesitation. This small wooden ship with two sets of oars used for paddling would be easy to grab and untie before anyone could stop him. It was no warship like in his dreams, but Rafa gladly accepted the vessel, which also braced a small sail. As he jumped in the boat, a local man began to yell and scream at him in the native tongue, but Rafa quickly pushed the boat off the dock and rowed toward open water of the calm bay, ignoring the old man's warnings and screams. Rafa looked back as he left the port, only to see Clement and Anem arguing with the enraged old man as Rafa felt his spirit lighten.

He set his eyes forward to the open ocean, but quickly returned his eyesight to the calm, shallow waters he dwelt in, not wanting to experience the same fear he felt earlier.

As his boat moved further out near the fishing boats beyond the coast, he noted the surplus of fish being caught by the fishermen. They joyfully collected their catch beyond what each could hold. Wisdom's inventions brought fish into the harbor, and he knew this was, once again, "Wisdom's hand" making its presence known, even out in the waters.

But Rafa's eyes could not escape the draw towards the deep waters as of now. He couldn't resist the pull of fear. As he gazed over the horizon, he noticed what looked like a giant fin in the distance, and he froze. "Is that? It couldn't be?" Rafa said. "Not now. Not the dream. I am not ready."

He looked closer and to his relief, it was not that beast of his fantasy. It was a sail. A dark green sail emerged on the horizon. Relieved that it wasn't the Leviathan, though the fear still pressed his heart, Rafa peered closer and saw that it was not just one ship, but a dozen boats headed north to the coast. He couldn't tell where these ships came from, but he knew they

were not Neshaman. He stared at the fleet, but only saw the creature of his dream. He saw the great beast, his warship, and his triumphant victory within his sleep. Yet, the fear in his heart turned him quickly back to the shore as he paddled swiftly to return home. The sun was almost set, when he noticed Clement and Anem waiting for him, with an expected anger.

"Thanks for leaving us!" They spoke sarcastically.

Rafa ignored their response. "Guys, did you see the ships heading this way? I couldn't tell where they were from. It didn't seem Caly to me."

"What did they look like?" Clement asked.

"The sails looked like Leviathan fins. That's all I could see. It freaked me out for a moment." Rafa said.

"That's odd." Clement stated. "None of the Empires have sails like that."

With the sun setting, Rafa and his friends headed back home for the night. All the events of the day continued to replay in his mind as he made his way home through Rousha to get a night's rest. He thought of his dad. He pondered the deep ocean. He prided himself in his sparring victory earlier in the day. Still above all, those fin-like sails remained in his mind...

*Where could these ships be coming from? What business do they have here?
And what of those great green sails?*