

Nusha's ears pricked up at the sound of horses and men's voices. She crawled out of her bed of mud and pine needles and stumbled through the trees. After a few minutes of trailing the sound she emerged onto a road where a caravan was trundling by.

"Hail!" she called.

"By Akatosh, you scared us!"

The horses were made to stop, and one of the two Imperials sitting up front descended with a sneer on his face.

"What do you want? Not here to try and rob us, I hope. We've got protection."

Out of the back of the caravan an Orc appeared, with a rather glum expression on his face. He was holding a broadsword, but didn't look particularly keen on fighting.

"Oh no, I'm here to make a deal. I have a friend with me—a young Dunmer maiden—and we wish to make passage to Chorrol. Is there space on your cart?"

The Imperial licked his lips and rubbed his chin. The 'maiden' part had clearly worked.

"We could take you... for the low price of ten Septims."

"Wonderful. Wait here while I fetch my companion."

Nusha knew they were paying far more than was fair, but hiking to Chorrol with Karme whining all the way would cost Nusha far more than ten Septims.

"Wake up," she said, shaking Karme's shoulder.

"Is it time to go already?"

She groaned as she stood up, clearly not used to such basic conditions.

"I found us a ride."

Karme perked up considerably, until she saw the caravan they were travelling in. They were in the cart in the back, knee-to-knee on a narrow bench with the Orc who was known as 'Snottalug', for his constant runny nose. On either side of them were stacked crates of goods, as well as a few penned-in sheep that were close enough to drool on them. This happened to Karme more than once, and Nusha did a poor job of hiding her laughter.

Snottalug was entirely untalkative, and Karme quickly fell

asleep. Nusha, however, stayed alert. She didn't trust the Imperials or their bodyguard. They'd given Karme a look over that made Nusha wonder if they were interested in more than just her physical assets.

A few hours later they went down a much rougher road, and Karme was jolted awake by the bumping and shuddering. The cart pulled to a stop, and before Nusha could ask what was going on, Snottalug had headed outside.

It was a trap, Nusha was sure. Karme, despite her clothes, had an air of riches about her, and these Imperials weren't about to pass up the opportunity to rob two fools and leave the bodies in the middle of nowhere.

Karme scowled. "If they aren't going to tell us what's going on, I'm going to go ask."

"Wait!"

Karme left the carriage and Nusha quickly followed behind her. The sunlight stung her eyes, and it took a moment to get her bearings. Karme was stretching, completely oblivious to Snottalug, who was lunging at her with his sword.

"Look out!" Nusha cried.

Karme turned, and saw the Orc's blade at the last moment. She flung herself to the side, barely dodging it. A loud cry sounded from the trees, and the two Imperials, now wielding swords, charged forth. Nusha had her throwing knives in hand by now, and tossed them at the oncoming men. The blades landed cleanly in their larynges, and they fell to the ground, gasping for air.

Karme had managed to stand up, but Snottalug was backing her up against a tree, readying a second strike. He was clearly hesitating after the swift death of his masters, but didn't have the guts to give up and leave them alone. Karme stared at him in terror, like a fish out of water.

Nusha groaned and ran forward. She leapt onto Snottalug and looped her arms around his shoulders.

He cried out, bucking and swinging, trying to throw her off. She drew out her dagger and, scrambling with her legs to get a good purchase, pulled it across his throat.

“Ugh!” Karme cried.

Nusha jumped off Snottalug, and he came crashing to the ground, blood spraying from his neck like a fountain, drenching Karme’s shirt. Nusha would’ve laughed if she wasn’t angry.

“Why didn’t you use your magic?” she said in a low grunt. She collected her knives from the throats of the Imperials, careful to not get blood on herself.

Karme stood there blinking for a moment, still recovering from the shock. Then her face contorted in anger.

“Not all of us are trained killers! I panicked!”

“It’s a good thing you have me to protect you.”

“I wouldn’t have needed the protection if you hadn’t hitched us a ride on a caravan with a bunch of murderers!”

Nusha sighed and rubbed her side, where Snottalug had elbowed her hard. This argument was going nowhere.

“I don’t know why they thought we were worth robbing,” she said. “Anyway, we can take the horses now and make quick progress to Chorrol. Assuming they haven’t lead us too far off course.”

Nusha went to the caravan and rummaged around the crates, taking whatever might be useful. She opened the sheep pen, but they barely seemed to notice, staying inside the cart. They’d probably be eaten by a bear, but that was none of her business.

They took the horses and headed to Chorrol. Karme sulked for most of the day, only talking to Nusha when they stopped and made camp for dinner, eating the food they’d pillaged from the caravan. Nusha didn’t raise the topic of what would happen once they arrived in Chorrol, but she was sure Karme would refuse to come to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary. And after seeing the shameful display she’d made against Snottalug, it was probably for the better.

Chorrol was where she was supposed to drop off the amulet. She decided she would tell a white lie, say that in the chaos with the moneylenders the amulet had been taken by another. Then she would head back to her home Sanctuary in Leyawiin, where hopefully retribution would not await her for her failure.

Nusha was used to failing, but it still stung each time. And this time she had a feeling there would be no lenience. She had, after all, spent the last few years talking about her prophecy, the great destiny Sithis had promised her in a vision. Now, in her time of greatest need, it seemed Sithis had forsaken her.

They arrived in Chorrol around noon the next day. They parked their horses at the stable outside town, but lingered by the gate.

“You have your own business,” Nusha said. “I’m going to the Sanctuary.”

Karme for a brief moment looked sorry, as if she regretted the sour note on which they were parting. Nusha turned to leave but Karme grabbed her arm.

“Wait! We’ll meet at dusk, by the statue of the Saint of Sancre Tor.”

Nusha squinted at her, trying to figure out her game. The girl was probably just covering herself in the likely instance that she didn’t receive the help she sought.

“Fine. I will see you then.”

Before Nusha could leave, though, a guard approached them from the gate.

“Where have you two come from?”

Karme opened her mouth to speak but before she could, Nusha said, “Skingrad,” shooting her a look. There was no way this guard was asking out of pure curiosity.

“Good.” He took off his helmet and scratched his head with a gloved hand. “There’s been a murder in Bruma. A Dunmer woman killed her husband in cold blood, can you believe it?”

“Must be that northern wind,” Nusha said. “Drives a person mad.”

“Anyway, keep a lookout for anyone suspicious. The culprit disappeared without a trace. She could be anywhere.” He looked at Karme again, as if reconsidering his original appraisal.

Karme curtsied to him and said in an even more obsequious voice than usual, “Thank you for informing us. We are merely travelling to Chorrol to sample the delicacies of Colovia.”

“You are, eh? How about I show you where to find the best wine?”

Nusha slipped away, glad that Karme’s looks had provided a distraction. She followed a lightly-treaded path through the forest. It led half a mile away from town, at which point Nusha saw the well that concealed the entrance to the Chorrol Sanctuary. Before she reached it, though, she heard a familiar voice.

“Greetings, Mudscals.”

Tun-Na dropped from the trees, landing in front of Nusha. He gazed down at her. She always felt tiny next to him, and she crossed her arms defensively.

“Greetings.”

Nusha’s history with Tun-Na was long and bitter. They had both been born under the sign of the Shadow, and thus taken from Black Marsh at a young age to be trained as Shadowscale assassins. They had never seen eye-to-eye, and while their relationship now was not openly hostile, a great deal of resentment bubbled under the surface.

“So how did your first assignment go?” Tun-Na asked. “I just finished mine.”

Tun-Na had been tasked with disposing of an old miser living in the Great Forest, whose son couldn’t wait for his inheritance. A quick job, by the sounds of it.

“Things have gone... differently than expected.”

Tun-Na grinned. “I heard about what happened in Bruma. Sounds like a real *disaster*.” He emphasised the last word, hissing his S’s like a snake.

“Not entirely. I have found a potential candidate for the Brotherhood.”

Tun-Na gave a raspy chuckle. “And where is this assassin of yours? Don’t tell me it’s that wispy Dunmer you rocked into town with.”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“Oh, Nusha, you never change. Did the Dark Elf whisper sweet words to you, tell you how she’s always fantasised of joining the Brotherhood? You always were susceptible to foolishness. Tell

me, is this what your great prophecy predicted?”

Nusha felt a strong urge to wring Tun-Na’s neck. Just hearing his voice elicited a deep, dark loathing in her, a reaction built up over years of childhood torment.

“Move aside, Tun-Na, so I may go and make my report.”

“By all means.”

Tun-Na stepped aside, waving his hand for Nusha to pass. She stomped past him and climbed into the well, not looking back.

The Chorrol Sanctuary bore a great similarity to the one in Leyawiin. It seemed that the architects in the Brotherhood did not possess much creativity. It was gloomy and oppressive, all stone columns and curved low ceilings, with skull-shaped candelabras and obscure runes etched into corners. After speaking the password to the bloodstained door, which had always come across as childish to Nusha, she was greeted in the foyer by a representative and taken into an office to make her report.

Nusha kept things brief. She told them that she had arrived to find Svaknal already dead, and the amulet stolen, and that she had to take a slow route out of town to avoid the moneylenders. The representative nodded curtly, wrote down some notes, and told her to return to Leyawiin, with no indication of whether she would be reprimanded.

She would have to make sure Karme left town before anyone found out about her lie, but that seemed easy enough.

Nusha strode out of the office, eager to leave this dark place. But she stopped after only a few paces, turning to see a figure leering at her from the corner, a mischievous grin planted on his face. Leaning against the wall, having listened to every word she had said, was Tun-Na.

“See you in Leyawiin, Nusha,” he said, before scurrying out of the Sanctuary.