

Tun-Na heard everything.

Nusha had been wandering through the forest for hours now. It was getting dark, but still she pushed onwards, as if pursued by her own fears.

It wasn't the end of the world. She tried to tell herself that. Tun-Na's word was hardly praised highly. They might think he was just trying to sabotage her.

But Nusha knew that they were waiting, in the Sanctuary in Leyawiin, for her to fail. Her whole life up until now had been a long series of failures, with only a brief interlude in the past few years, since she had the vision. But now Sithis had forsaken her, the path had grown dark, and she was teetering on the precipice of being cleansed from the Brotherhood entirely. Failing a mission was one thing, but lying about it? That merited serious retribution.

She imagined the faces of her instructors, those who'd lorded over her as she grew up: Preceptors Meerzal, Reenul, and Dreet-Shei, a trio of formidable and unforgiving Argonians. It would merely be a confirmation of her inherent worthlessness to them. But Preceptor Lazz, the sole Orc in the Dark Priory, an outsider along with Nusha, had always believed in her. How would she react when she found out about Nusha's deception?

The longer Nusha tortured herself with these questions, the further Tun-Na got to Leyawiin. She knew this, and yet every time she considered making chase, to try and beat him there, she froze, unable to work past the chilling feeling that it didn't matter. Even if she got there first, it was only a matter of time before they grew tired of her slip-ups. The severity of her failure in Bruma was fully hitting her now, and she had nothing to hold onto, nothing to stop her from falling down the great abyss of self-loathing she had spent so much of her adolescence in.

A scream sounded in the forest. Nusha looked around dumbly, not sure if she had imagined it. It came again though, this time with words: "Get away from me!"

It was Karme's voice.

Nusha ran towards her, sprinted with all her might, propelled by the opportunity, the need, to take away her own pain

by helping another.

Nusha broke into a clearing and saw what Karme was screaming at. Seven, no, eight skeletons, clad in helmets, wielding foreign, curved blades, leered towards them. One of them had its hand round Karme's neck, and she flailed desperately to free herself.

Nusha acted without thinking. She jumped at the skeleton, tackling it to the ground. Where she had expected to meet fragile, brittle bones, she was hit by a surprisingly sturdy figure. The skeleton reacted quickly, digging its hands into Nusha's eyes. She poured out a fountain of expletives and grabbed its head, twisting it off and tossing it aside. To her disgust, the arms kept moving, and it took all her strength to wrest them off her.

Karme was faring better now, tossing warning fireballs at the creatures, but four of them were surrounding her, making bloodcurdling snapping noises as they approached.

Nusha cursed. There was no flesh for her weapons to make a purchase, no poison that would slay them. She turned round to take the helmet off the downed skeleton's head, figuring she could use it as a club, and came face-to-face with a reconstructed skeleton warrior.

She blinked twice. It had somehow reattached its head, and to top it off it had retrieved its weapon, too.

Nusha fainted, then kicked the skeleton in the stomach.

"It's no use!" she cried. "They can reform. We have to run."

Karme nodded, and send out a wave of flames in both directions. The skeletons hissed, stumbling back, just long enough for the two of them to make a break for it through the trees. Nusha had never felt this scared in her life. Her heart beat like a drum in her ear, her ragged breath burned in her chest, and her legs felt like jelly. But she could still hear the skeletons wheezing and clicking, and she wasn't going to stop until they were well, well away.

They broke out of the trees, the city walls visible in front of them.

Nusha started to cry out for the guards, but Karme shouted "No!" at her.

“They’re drawn towards the amulet.”

They dashed to the stables, hopped over the fence, and got on their horses. The owner came out complaining about their bad attitude, but when Karme screamed at her to open the gate, she relented and let them go.

They galloped east, the night wind streaming in their faces. They had only the moon to guide them, but they pushed the horses onwards, riding non-stop for over an hour, until they were sure that the skeletons were far behind them.

Karme pointed to a stream, and they dismounted to water the horses.

“Okay, what on *Nirn* were those?” Nusha asked, once her head had stopped spinning. “And what was that about the amulet?”

Karme pulled it out from underneath her shirt. The ruby in the centre was glowing an ugly, violent red now, like a wart about to burst.

“The one that attacked me, it was trying to remove it. It must be some kind of homing beacon for them.”

“Wonderful. And you can’t take it off. Who would design something so sadistic?”

“Akaviri, I think.”

“Sorry?”

Karme knelt by the stream and took a drink. Nusha told herself off for shouting at the girl. It wasn’t her fault, really.

“What makes you think it’s Akaviri?” she asked, more calmly.

“For one thing, the Countess of Bruma wanted it. She collects Akaviri artefacts. In fact, that was part of the reason Svaknal was so poor. When he refused to hand it over, she ruined him.”

“But it never displayed this... propensity to summon skeletons before?”

“No. I think Svaknal’s death must have activated it. But those skeletons were Akaviri, I’m sure. They were wielding katanas.”

For once, Karme’s education seemed to have been of use,

though Nusha mused to herself that it didn't matter if they could identify them, because at the end of the day the skeletons were still going to try and kill them.

"The thing is, if they're Akaviri, they probably came from Pale Pass."

"Where's that?" Nusha asked. She felt ignorant, but she supposed there was no reason for her to know all this. They had been educated at the Priory, but the subjects had been much more practical.

"Near Bruma. The precise location is lost. If these skeletons came all the way from there, though..."

"They won't stop pursuing us until they have the amulet back. Is that correct?"

Karme nodded with a grim expression. Nusha crouched down beside her. She eyed the water suspiciously before taking a drink, as if it might be poisoned.

"Sounds like you could do with some help."

Karme looked at her pleadingly. Unlike her previous requests, Nusha actually felt some compassion for her this time.

"I'll help you figure out what this amulet is, and how to get rid of it, on one condition. You come with me to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary in Leyawiin. You don't have to join, just... keep an open mind?"

Karme smiled. "Won't I have to die if I find out all your secrets?"

"I've probably told you enough to warrant being purified myself."

"Purified? They'll give you a bath?"

Nusha rolled her eyes and nudged her with her elbow. "Sorry, that's no-good-penny-pinching-moralless-cutthroat speak. Wouldn't expect you to understand it."

Nusha felt an odd feeling inside. Eventually, she realised it was happiness. At making a friend, or at least making friendly conversation. It must've just been the adrenaline from their encounter with the skeletons, she decided.

Karme got up and went back to her horse, and Nusha tried

to clear her head, stop thinking about frivolities. Being enemies with someone was easy. But friends you could disappoint.

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Landil muttered curses all the way through the Altmeri pantheon. He had lost the girl.

Somewhere, between The Oak and Crosier and the outskirts of town, she had slipped away. Landil stalked up and down the path outside of Chorrol, careful to not attract the attention of the guards. The only place she could have logically gone was into the forest, but why? At this time of night it was downright foolish to go wandering off.

Maybe she had realised he was following her, and made a run for it. He eyed the stables nervously. He hadn't thought to note which horse had belonged to her. By the Blue Divide, how had that effete Dunmer given him the slip?

She was wearing the amulet. The amulet that he'd ordered the Dark Brotherhood to collect, the entire reason he was so far from home, up to his neck in arrogant Imperials and testy Orcs.

It was sheer luck that he had even managed to track her this far. He had arranged to collect his bounty from a representative near Chorrol. When they told him the amulet had yet to arrive, he panicked, thinking the moneylenders had taken it. But not long after he saw the Dunmer wandering around town, and everything clicked into place.

He didn't have time to be dawdling here. He marched to the stables, collected his horse, and rode east. There was only one road to the Imperial City, and if he did not chance upon her, he would turn back. Several hundred yards down the road, he heard a noise and pulled the horse to a stop.

It was a most curious sound, like the creaking of an old door, but higher pitched, and accompanied by crablike snapping noises. Landil dismounted and stepped warily into the trees, whispering an illumination spell as he went.

The light broke through the black, and Landil almost fell backwards in surprise. Mere metres away from him, stalking

through the undergrowth, were a band of armed skeletons. When he saw that they paid no attention to him, his fear turned to curiosity.

Waving his arms in the air, he uttered an incantation, willing the soldiers to obey his command. They continued to march doggedly east, ignoring his spell. He tried a spell of calm, thinking a different school of magic might work better, but the skeletons remained unperturbed.

East. They must be heading for the Imperial City, he thought. He moved carefully towards them, in case they suddenly decided he was indeed a foe, and examined them up close. Those helmets, along with those swords, could only come from one source. Akaviri warriors.

Could this be it? The power of the Amulet of Bonebreath? He had spent so many hours poring over books, following obscure references, translating fragments. The power of the thing was mythical, but now that he saw its effects up close, he couldn't quite believe it.

If they were heading east, they were likely following the amulet. And that meant that wherever the skeletons went, his prey wouldn't be far ahead.

Landil grinned like a child during New Life Festival. There was no escaping him now.