

“Tun-Na.”

Nusha practically spat the name out. He had always been a thorn in her side. She had hoped that once they came of age, went their separate ways to complete their assignments for the Brotherhood, that they would at least be able to slip into mutual disinterest. But it seemed that Tun-Na insisted on hounding her, underscoring her failures and laughing at them every step of the way.

Nusha had known it was Tun-Na as soon as they saw the ogres. What appeared to Karme to be mindless slaughter was to Nusha a clear sign: watch out, I’m ready for you.

“Tell me,” Tun-Na said, “did your prophecy foretell this?”

Nusha winced. Ever since the capture in the Imperial City, her belief in the prophecy had vanished entirely. She had once been insistent, vehement about its truth, but now she found her face flushing. Tun-Na had mocked her endlessly about it, and it seemed, along with his appraisal of her weakness, that he was right again.

“That doesn’t matter Tun-Na. Wh—”

“Oh, but it does!”

Tun-Na spread his arms wide in a display of dominance.

“The Dark Brotherhood knows what you did: betraying your mission, lying to them. Colluding with this... creature.” He gestured dismissively at Karme. “News of your adventure has gone all the way up to the Black Hand.”

Nusha knew this, of course. It must have been them who sent Meeran to rescue her, though she was now sure that the plan had been to kill her. But Tun-Na’s revelation filled her with shame nonetheless. Before, she had been an insignificant blip on the radar of the Brotherhood. Now she was a runaway, and those who turned their back on the Brotherhood always came to regret their decision.

“They’ve given me permission to disobey one of the tenets,” Tun-Na said. “I am here to kill you.”

Tun-Na waited for Nusha to respond, but Nusha simply shrugged. It was almost a liberating feeling, to be declared an enemy by those who had only grudgingly accepted you before. She

no longer had to try and fit a mould that would never accommodate her. She was an enemy of the Brotherhood, so she had nothing more to lose. And there was no way she was going down to the likes of Tun-Na.

“Karme,” Nusha muttered, taking off the chameleon ring and handing it to her. “Go ahead. Use the ring to get through the fort and get rid of the amulet. Find the Draconian Madstone. If you have to return without me, so be it.”

“But Nusha—”

“Go!”

Karme nodded, gave Nusha a worried glance, and ran towards the fort. Tun-Na paid her no attention. He wasn’t here for the amulet.

Karme disappeared into the courtyard and the heavy door that lead into the interior of the fort opened and swung shut behind her.

Tun-Na smiled, and walked away from Nusha. As he went, he removed his quiver and weapons, throwing them aside.

“Come, Nusha. Let’s fight, hand to hand. Just like the old days.”

Nusha walked up, threw her weapons onto the pile with Tun-Na’s, and readied herself.

They had fought many times. At first, it was Tun-Na and his gang of friends teaming up on her, and she had no choice in the matter. Eventually she had to fight back, and for years the preceptors were breaking them apart, doling out equal punishment, even though Tun-Na was always the one to start it. When they entered the west wing of the priory, they were too old to get away with such childish games, but Nusha had never fully lost the thirst to beat Tun-Na to a pulp.

Nusha was weaker than Tun-Na. It was true back then, and it was true now. But she had other strengths. She had the advantage of speed, plus the pent up hatred from years of torment. Tun-Na’s talents—climbing and archery—wouldn’t save him here.

They stood several paces apart in the courtyard, bent over in a fighting stance. Tun-Na bowed mockingly to Nusha, and the

fight began.

She immediately took the chance to strike, running at him and curling her fist up into his stomach. But he jumped aside before it connected, and his fist slammed into her head, knocking her sideways.

“Come *on*, Nusha. Try and be less obvious.”

Nusha gritted her teeth and swiped again, wishing to wipe that smug smile off his face. He jerked his head sideways, and swung his leg into her side, knocking the wind out of her and sending her to her knees. Then he brought his other leg up, his knee colliding with her face with a sickening *crunch*, knocking her onto her back.

Nusha panted, tasting blood from her nose. Her vision swam. She wasn’t used to fighting in this bitter cold. Tun-Na appeared over her, a determined grin on his face, and she rolled over, just avoiding another kick. She sprang to her feet and jumped back a few paces, reconsidering her approach.

Tun-Na looked relaxed, like he was just warming up. Nusha was already throbbing with pain in various places, blood and sweat clouding her vision. How had it gone this badly already?

Before she could figure out an approach, Tun-Na dived at her. She ducked, avoiding his punch, and rose up with her fist to counter. But he had already leapt back, as if he had anticipated her counter and prepared accordingly.

Think, Nusha. You have twice the brains that he does.

And yet Tun-Na was outsmarting her at every turn. That was what had always infuriated her, set her alight with petty, childish envy. Not only did he torment her, but he was *smarter* than her. By the time she had eked out an advantage of her own in sneaking, he was already leagues ahead of her in everything else.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. That was the problem. She was letting anger and hatred cloud her judgement. It made her rash and sloppy, and with the cold weather Tun-Na had quickly taken the upper hand.

Seeing Nusha’s calm mien, Tun-Na threw in a jibe: “Getting tired, Nusha? I thought you were going to make this fun.”

She didn't take the bait, and kept an expression of stony calm. Her eyes darted around the fort, for the first time properly taking in the surroundings. There were three levels to the place, with a circular viewing area in the centre. But the third level was half collapsed, the ground littered with the fallen stone. Maybe she could make use of that.

They paced around each other. Tun-Na feinted, and attempted to strike again, but Nusha dodged, and quickly moved away from him in case he struck again. She noticed a flash of irritation on his face. Good. Let him be the child.

Then, when the stairs were behind her, she turned and ran, bolting up the weathered steps. She almost tripped but managed to stabilise, and Tun-Na was taken by surprise, slow to follow behind her. That would give her plenty of time to reach the third level.

"Running away, Nusha?" he jeered after her. "You're making me nostalgic."

Nusha ignored him and turned round to the second flight of stairs. By the time she reached the third floor Tun-Na had caught up with her, and she only had a few seconds to assess the area. The stone floor of the fort covered only about half of the level, and it looked weathered and unstable. She identified which areas looked strongest, before turning to face Tun-Na.

"Nowhere left to run," he said with a wicked grin.

Nusha paced backwards, casting a glance over her shoulder. She let Tun-Na corner her, pushing her towards the edge, making him think he had the advantage.

"I had hoped you would provide a more exciting end than this," he said. "But I suppose it's fitting for you to meet such a cowardly end."

Tun-Na made a few feints, and Nusha jumped back, acting afraid. Tun-Na cackled with glee, swinging his fists again to try and scare her. She was only a metre from the edge, and she felt the ground wobbling beneath her.

Tun-Na finally swung for real, and his eyes bulged in surprise as Nusha jumped *forward*. He was hunched over and she

landed on his shoulders, using him as a boost to get away from the edge and back to the safety of the stairs.

Nusha whipped round to see Tun-Na fall onto the floor. A crack deepened in the stone, and for a few seconds it wobbled menacingly. Tun-Na's expression turned to surprise, then horror, as the ground gave way beneath him.

Nusha winced, expecting to hear the *crack* of his body hitting the ground below. But there was silence. She looked back and saw one claw dug into the edge of the stone, hanging on for dear life.

"Well, Tun-Na," she called. "It's been fun, but I've got a mission to complete. You always were good at puzzles. See if you can figure this one out."

She ran down the stairs and into the fort, Tun-Na cursing her every step of the way.