

The chamber was dark when they entered. Nusha squinted, her eyes quickly adjusted to the gloom. It was a wide, spacious room, and all around the edges were crates, piles of clothes, and weapons. The Akaviri army had clearly used this room for storage, and it looked like they were planning on hiding out there for a long time.

A blue light came from the opposite wall, and Nusha at first thought it was from the same magic that lit the other rooms. But this one was different; pale, and faint. It appeared as a strange mist, which whirled together, moved by some invisible wind, until it coalesced into the form of a person.

Commander Mishaxhi of Akavir stood before them as a spectre. He was dressed in the rivulleted armour of his people, katana sheathed by his side, an impressive figure even in death. Karme stepped forward but Nusha shot out her arm. There was no telling what this ghost would do.

“You are the messenger,” the ghost said, finally.

Karme opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing. Nusha wasn’t sure what they should do. Play along with this game? Or tell him the messenger was dead, that the war was over? The commander continued.

“We have been holed up here for weeks now. I hope you come bearing good news.”

He thought he was still there, in the war. Except something was wrong. Karme started to speak but Nusha interrupted her.

“This doesn’t make sense. He’s speaking Cyrodiilic.”

Karme shook her head. “No, you’re just hearing it as that. I heard it in Dunmeri. He’s speaking directly to our minds.”

The ghost observed them as they spoke. Even stood still, his weapon sheathed, he managed to appear threatening.

Karme pulled out the amulet, its glow mixing with the hazy blue light of the ghost.

“I have come to return your amulet,” she said.

The ghost’s expression twisted into rage, and he let out a guttural cry, which echoed across the stone chamber.

“You! You are the one who stole my amulet!”

In a second he had unsheathed his sword and moved forward. Nusha had thought that the ghost couldn't harm them, but now she wasn't so sure.

"No!" Karme cried. "I promise, I didn't mean to, I..."

She tugged at the chain, but the amulet would not come off. Mishaxhi marched closer.

Nusha pulled the bow off her back, nocked the arrow, and fired. It flew straight through the ghost, landing in a pile of weapons on the other side of the room.

"It's no use!" Karme said. "Only silver will harm it."

Nusha swore and started rummaging through the weapons around them. It was hard to tell what material they were made from in the dark room, and she had to move nearer to the ghost to be able to see. Meanwhile, Mishaxhi swung at Karme, who narrowly dodged the blow. The sword sliced through one of the crates like butter, confirming the real danger of the commander. Karme's injured arm whacked into one of the crates, and she howled in pain.

"It's no use," Nusha said, throwing away a broadsword. "These are all iron and steel."

"Traitor!" the ghost shrieked. "I will cut out your entrails and eat them, I will turn you into a mindless soldier of death!"

Mishaxhi turned on them, backing them into a corner.

"What can we do?" Nusha said.

"I'll have to use my magic. Nusha, when I give the signal, you run through that wall the ghost came through."

"What?"

"It's a trick, an invisible wall."

The ghost swung at them and they separated. Nusha ran to the other side of the room, but Karme taunted the ghost, led it after her. A fireball grew in her hand, expanding into a heavy globe. Nusha could feel its heat from the other side of the room. Karme gritted her teeth, huge droplets of sweat pouring down her face, as she concentrated on the flame.

"Now!" she cried.

She loosed the fireball and it crashed into the ghost,

sending it hurtling across the room and into a pile of swords. Nusha ran towards the wall but was swept off her feet by the explosion the fireball. She landed face-first on the floor, and the whole building shook around her, great chunks of stone dislodging themselves from the ceiling and falling down.

She now understood Karme's plan. They were bringing the whole place down with them. She forced herself up, despite a blinding pain in her leg, and hobbled over through the wall.

As soon as she passed through the other side, it was as if she'd entered a bubble. The noise from the other room was heavily muffled, but the fort still shook, and this small alcove was no safer than the rest of it.

In front of her, placed on a small octagonal altar, was a glimmering black pendant. The Draconian Madstone. She grabbed it and pulled it around her neck. All this trouble, thanks to these stupid pieces of jewellery.

Beyond the altar was another door, and from the chill in the air she knew that the way out was not far beyond it. But Karme was still behind her, and she wouldn't leave the Dunmer to die.

She turned back. Inside the Venom of the Serpent, half the ceiling had collapsed, and it was almost pitch black. The light of the ghost had been definitively extinguished.

"Nusha!"

Nusha followed the direction of the cry, finding Karme trapped under a pile of rubble. She quickly got to work shifting it aside.

"Leave me," she rasped.

"No" was all Nusha said. She pushed the rock aside with a strength she didn't know she possessed, freeing the Dark Elf and pulling her to her feet.

Nusha turned round towards the fake wall, but just at that moment a huge chunk of ceiling fell down, blocking the way.

"Bogfire!" Nusha cried. "We'll have to go back the way we came."

Half carrying Karme, she navigated past the huge chunks of ceiling and back into the Fangs of the Serpent. They made slow

progress, and more than once a piece of stone landed where they were about to step, but as they got further from the Venom, the fort grew more stable.

They were in the Mouth of the Serpent, almost at the exit, when Nusha heard a whimper.

In a shadowy corner of the fort, Tun-Na lay against the wall, an arrow sticking out of his chest.

Nusha knew she should have left him. He would've done the same to her without blinking an eye—actually, he probably would've taken time to gloat at her. But right now, the thought of losing even Tun-Na was too much for her to bear.

“What happened?” she said, helping him to his feet.

“That damn skeleton...”

Tun-Na mumbled a few more words and passed out. With Karme's help, they dragged his body outside, just as the corridor they were in started to collapse.

It was dusk in the courtyard, but they didn't stop moving until they were a safe distance away from the fort. The once elegant ruins now looked like a sweetroll somebody had stepped on, all crumpled and disjointed. They collapsed against a rock, propping Tun-Na up beside them, and sat there for a long while, saying nothing.

“Do you think he's dead?” Karme murmured.

Nusha shook her head. “The arrow isn't nearly as deep as it looks. He'll come around. What happened to the pendant?”

Karme lifted it up. It was nothing more than a dented, old ruby now, the fiery glow gone completely. Karme pulled at the rusty chain and it snapped. She lifted an arm and threw it as far as she could, to be lost in the depths of the valley.

“Good riddance,” Nusha muttered.

“You got the Madstone?” Karme asked.

Nusha nodded, showing it to her. She supposed it was beautiful, but right now the sight of it made her feel sick.

The tumult of the collapsing fort finally finished, and they were left in the silence of the valley.

They both had a healthy collection of injuries. Karme had

the wound on her arm, as well as a heavily-twisted ankle and a lot of bruising from the rocks that had fallen on her. Nusha had a great lump on her head from some rubble that she hadn't even noticed hitting her, as well as a smattering of nasty cuts bruises from the fight with Tun-Na.

Nusha examined him again, just to make sure he was alive, and he slowly regained consciousness. He stared at the ground, unable to look into Nusha's eyes. Eventually, he spoke.

"You shouldn't have saved me."

"Oh, stop that," Nusha said.

She didn't have it in her to fight any longer. Whatever her history with Tun-Na, it was put aside for now.

"I'll come with you to Leyawiin," Tun-Na said. "Appeal for you. If they kill you, I'll die with you."

Nusha spat on the ground. "You'll do nothing of the sort. You'll go back and tell them you killed me, that I was just as easy as you had expected."

Tun-Na gazed up at her in confusion. "But Nusha, you could be—"

"I'll never be a real assassin, Tun-Na. I understand that now." She leant against the rock, wrapping her cloak tight around her. Now that she'd gotten over the shock of their ordeal, the cold was seeping in again. "I don't know if I truly had a vision from Sithis, or if it was all a fantasy. I expect I'll never know. Maybe Sithis wished me to serve him in another way, maybe not. Whatever the case, I'm not cut out to be an assassin."

Tun-Na shook his head. "But Meeran—"

"Is a fool. And possibly in the Imperial Prison, thanks to me."

She smiled at that idea. He didn't deserve it, but she couldn't help but be amused.

"If I go back to the Brotherhood, there's a good chance I'll mess up again. I'd always be worried about the consequences of my actions. But if you tell them I'm dead, I'll be free."

Free to do what, Nusha didn't know. She'd spent all her life in the dark confines of the Priory and the various Sanctuaries

around Cyrodiil. No ordinary life awaited her, but whatever she found, she was sure it would be better than living as a heartless killer.

“Karme, do you think you can walk? We’ve got a long journey ahead of us.”