

Hieronymus had survived great battles, bested men in fights while unarmed, and been assigned to dangerous missions in obscure corners of Tamriel. But he had never seen anything like the skeletons. They had been trapped in the palace for over a week now, but neither their strength, nor the magic that bound them, had waned. Archmage Hannibal Traven himself was unable to disenchant the bones, and in the end they gave up, instead observing the skeletons' behaviour to try and decipher a weakness.

The skeletons tried to slice the wall of the circular chamber with their swords at first, but when the hard stone blunted their blades, they resorted to scraping at it. They clawed at the walls day after day, the wretched screeching echoing through the palace like clockwork. Each night the guards drew straws to see who would have to watch over them.

Then, three days after the prisoners escaped, the skeletons suddenly stopped. The guards perked up, noticing the lack of scraping. The undead soldiers stiffened like statues and collapsed into a heap, bones breaking apart, disintegrating into dust, leaving only rusty weapons and helmets behind. The captain of the guard was called into the room, and surveyed the remains of the skeletons with dismay.

Hieronymus would retire a few years later, when his tireless campaign against the Grey Fox grew too stressful for him. He would never know the secret behind the mystery of the Akaviri soldiers, never know what happened to the Dunmer and the Argonian, the only two people known to have escaped the Imperial Prison.

With an exasperated sigh, Hieronymus called forth one of the guards.

"Sweep up this mess and deliver it to the Arcane University. I'm sure they'll find some use for it."

* * *

Landil gasped with exhaustion, white spots flashing in his vision. He leant against a nearby tree to stop his shaking. He

mumbled another healing spell, but it could only staunch the bleeding, and he would need proper medical attention if he was going to make it back to the Summerset Isles alive. The city walls of Bruma wavered in the distance, and he pressed onwards.

What nagged at the back of his mind, though, was the thought that it was all in vain. The Dunmer wench and the Argonian freak had outsmarted him. They were taking the amulet to Pale Pass, and Landil doubted they would make it out alive. If the amulet was returned to its master, it would likely never leave those ruins again.

Landil spat and cursed the divines. Tracelmo would not forgive this mistake, no matter what excuses he gave. That haughty ivory tower mage had no idea how difficult the task was. It wouldn't have *been* difficult, if that blasted Dunmer hadn't interfered.

Even if Landil made it back to the Summerset Isles, he had no life to return to. In his feverish state he began to fantasise of running away, perhaps starting a new life in High Rock or Daggerfall. But he doubted he would prove any less hapless there. Bad luck had a habit of following him around.

By the time he reached Bruma, he had pulled himself together somewhat. The wound wasn't as deep as it had initially seemed, or at least, it wasn't going to be deadly. He would seek the help of a healer in town, but discreetly, and think about what to do in the meantime.

As he was musing on this, he walked past the stables outside the city, barely noticing the group of Orcs congregating outside it, sharing heated words with the owner.

"Hey!"

Landil turned around wearily. One of them was jabbing a sausage-shaped finger at him.

"Do you know what happened to our horses?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Did you perhaps eat them and forget?"

The Orc snarled at him. Landil knew better than to make such a low blow, but in his current state he felt rather reckless.

"Say, I recognise him," another one of the louts said,

stepping closer to inspect him. “You were that one wandering around Chorrol, all suspicious. I reckon *you* took them.”

“Do you see any horses on me?”

They shrugged and mumbled between themselves.

“You’re a mage, aren’t you? What if you just magicked them away, hid them somewhere in the forest?”

“I assure you, I have much better things to do with my time than to spirit away horses. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

He turned to the city gates, but was stopped by a large hand on his shoulder.

“No, I won’t. You’re coming with us.”

Landil whipped round to cast a spell, but his hands had already been pulled behind him, and he gasped with pain as his wound reopened. He looked pleadingly at the stable owner, but found that they had shut themselves inside, not wanting to take a side in this conflict. He cast a desperate glance at the city guards, but their eyes were elsewhere. Too afraid to face the Orcs.

Maybe, Landil thought dryly as he was dragged into the trees, it would have been better to be killed by that Argonian.

* * *

Meeran bowed his head to the floor, wishing there was a way he could prostrate himself more than he already was. It did not matter if he begged for forgiveness. The Black Hand did not forgive.

“Meeran. You have surprised me, once again.”

Lucien Lachance’s voice had always reminded Meeran of the sibilant hiss of a snake. It was soft and yet venomous at once, and his words were always carefully chosen and enunciated.

“I apologise, Speaker.”

“I know that you are sorry. And yet, you must understand that I have no choice.”

Lucien spoke in velvety tones, committing men to death as if he were reading poetry. Occasionally he spoke in strangled whispers, as if he got sexual pleasure from giving out his orders.

His link to the Night Mother was strong, and when Meeran stood in his presence, he felt her gaze upon him.

Lucien Lachance did not feel sorry for Meeran. Such an emotion could not be present in this preternatural man, this sensuous figure of death. Meeran knew this, and the faux sympathy stung him like the fangs of a serpent slipping into his neck.

“Nusha did indeed have a... peculiar destiny,” Lucien continued. “But in the end, it was not that which you had envisioned. A shame. There are so few who can navigate Black Marsh like you do. But I suppose we all make mistakes in judgement.”

From Lucien’s tone, Meeran could tell that *he* never thought himself capable of error.

“Rise, Meeran.”

Trembling, Meeran stood up. He could no longer conceal his fear. Lucien held his chin, forced him to gaze directly into his eyes. The man leant closer to him, the candlelight flickering in his eyes hypnotically.

He drew Meeran towards him and kissed him, his human mouth bobbing awkwardly against Meeran’s snout. The Argonian shuddered in surprise. Lucien moved away, and Meeran felt a bitter taste slide down his throat. The poison took effect immediately, blurring his vision and numbing his muscles. He fell to the floor, the half-obscured smile of Lucien Lachance the last thing he saw.

* * *

“Don’t look, dear.”

It was too late. Fevari had already seen the starburst of entrails spilling out onto the cobbles of the street. Everyone in the district stood around it, gawping at Avranu’s grisly fate. The guards tried to move people back, but the crowd was too thick, and the only concession they received was some space to inspect the body.

Fevari didn’t know what to feel. She knew that this woman

was evil. She had heard her parents speak of her in hushed whispers at night, when they thought she was asleep. She could see the relief in their faces now. But to her, it was all just a small piece in the confusing tapestry that made up the lives of adults. Try as her parents might to make her look away, she knew that what she'd seen today would rest in her memory for a long time.

"She must've been responsible for those Akaviri skeletons."

"A fitting end. I wonder who did us the pleasure?"

"If only they could do the same with the Grey Fox."

Normally, Fevari would have wanted to stay there for hours, to listen to all the adults gossip and speculate. But today, their words buzzed in her ears like the flies that buzzed hungrily around the entrails before her.

"Let's go, Mother."

* * *

"Chew, Karme, chew!"

Karme had started to choke on a potato—the third time she'd done that this meal. She knew she should slow down, but despite the amount of stew and bread she'd eaten, her stomach still growled ravenously.

They'd made the journey back to Bruma without stopping. Tun-Na picked up considerably, and once they reached the horses he insisted they continue on without him. When they returned to the countess, she immediately accepted them in her court, and to Nusha's surprise, she wasn't waiting with a troop of Imperial soldiers to capture them.

Her eyes gleamed covetously as soon as Nusha revealed the Draconian Madstone, and she barely listened as they told her the revised version of their quest. She gave them a thousand Septims and ordered them away before they caused a ruckus in town.

They left Bruma, heading south and stopping at an inn off the beaten track. It was the kind of place where nobody would bat

an eyelid at such strange-looking visitors, as long as they had the Septims, but for extra security they took their meal to their cramped shared room, scarfing it down by candlelight.

They were safe for now. They had spotted no Imperial soldiers on the road, and it seemed the furore over the skeletons in the Imperial City had died down somewhat. It was an odd occurrence, for sure, but the last few decades had been full of strange happenings in the Empire.

Karme knew they wouldn't be safe forever, though.

She thought she would feel relieved that their journey had come to an end, but now she was realising that it wasn't over, that too much had happened for her to return to the simple, naïve life she had led before.

Worst of all, a heavy weight hung around her heart. She had been able to avoid thinking about it while they had the amulet, but she now worried greatly about her parents. She had not heard from them since she arrived in Bruma, and while the memories from her imprisonment were hazy and confused, she was sure she had told the Imperial interrogator about them while she was being questioned.

"Alright," she said, sending globs of stew flying into Nusha's lap. "What are you gonna do?"

Nusha laughed at her—the genteel manners Karme had once espoused had so righteously been cast aside. "I was hoping you'd have the answer to that."

Karme gulped, swallowing a spicy lump of meat. "I... have no idea. I think I should return to Morrowind, try and find my parents, but..."

"You're worried about getting caught up in another storm?"

She nodded. "And if they're dead, I think it's maybe better I don't know."

Nusha fiddled with her spoon. "Either way, I don't think I—we can stay in Cyrodiil."

Karme's heart fluttered at 'we'. She had been certain before that they would part, but now they both seemed reluctant.

The Argonian had seen more of her than anybody else in the world, and she had seen deep into her friend's heart as well. That was a bond that wouldn't be easily erased.

"Can't go to Skyrim," Nusha muttered. "Too cold."

"Morrowind's off the table. Don't suppose you want to go back to Black Marsh?"

Nusha chuckled and shook her head. "There's nothing there for me. And believe me, you might think you can rough it after our little adventure, but Black Marsh is something else entirely."

"I always dreamed of going to Hammerfell when I was a child," Karme said. "The structures and the landscape there are similar to Morrowind in some ways, yet there's something magical about it that fascinates me. And it'd be more than hot enough for you."

"It's certainly a good place to hide. No Imperial would come hunting for us in the desert. And we've lived through a nightmare. Maybe chasing a dream is just what we need."

Karme took a big spoonful of stew, hiding her smile behind it.

That night, she and Nusha slept in each other's arms, like that had by the statue of the Sentinel. But this time, Karme was more than warm enough.