

Chimerical

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Episode 11: Pain

Fjorn helps a few soldiers pile up the bandit's bodies. As they lay them out, they search them for valuables and clues to their identities. They strip the bodies naked, pouring lamp oil over them as they stack them like cordwood. Nish's hands burn as he passes them over the pile, setting the bodies ablaze with a stream of orange flames.

"So, do you know who these people are? ... Were?" He asks.

"No. Just another gang of bandits lead by some greedy bastard who doesn't want to work like the rest of us." A soldier answers.

"That's not entirely true." Another soldier interjects.

"Having a female leader doesn't really make them very special." The first remarks.

“A female *Khajiit* leader does, especially so close to the Imperial City. How many of them do you think are running around here?” The second retorts.

“Wait... Did they say who their leader was? Did she speak to anyone? Did anyone get a good look at her?!” Nish barrages them with questions.

“Well I... Uh... We...”

Nish grabs a soldier by the arm holes of his steel cuirass, pulling him closer and startling the warrior.

“Answer me, damn you!” Nish growls.

His companion draws his sword and stands near Nish’s side, pointing the blade towards the irascible Imperial. Jo’dehki sees the conflict unfolding and rushes toward them. He stands behind his friend, draping an arm over him and across his chest, pulling him away from the soldiers.

“Calm down, my friend. He is not an enemy. Please release him.” Jo’dehki pleads.

Nish complies, his fingers loosening as he pulls his hands away from the nervous soldier, holding them up in the air in surrender. Jo’dehki releases his friend; Nish steps back. The armed soldier sheaths his sword, watching the spellword apprehensively.

“I apologize... .. It’s just...” Nish hesitates.

“We may know the leader of the bandits.” Jo’dehki finishes for him.

“It’s alright...” The soldier begins, adjusting his cuirass. “We only saw her from a distance. She had a male Imperial with her.”

“At first, we thought he was the leader, until she ordered him to lead her men into battle like a trained dog.” The other soldier chuckles.

“He must have been her consort.” The first adds.

“That did not take her very long, yes?” Jo’dehki remarks.

“What can you tell us about her?”

The soldiers motion for the Imperial and Khajiit to follow. They sit on the ground not far from the burning corpses, and promptly explain their encounter with the bandit gang in detail. They had been traveling with a large caravan, which had feared the bandits. The gang had been picking off caravans for nearly a week, a relatively recent development, but already a well-known one. The caravan leader had asked the Cheydinhal guards to accompany them, which they were happy to do, for a price. They left Cheydinhal for Anvil, though the guards would only follow them until they reached the Imperial City, where the caravan would then hire new guards.

As soon as they reached the crest of a hill barely a kilometer behind them, a scout had spotted them. They had

assumed that the scout was merely a hunter, as he carried a bow and quiver, and was dressed in simple clothes. As they passed the distant scout, he retrieved a horn from behind a tree and blew a loud signal. As they turned a bend, they were met by a female Khajiit of the Suthay-Raht breed. A male Imperial with long black hair stood beside her, holding her hand. When Arientia approached to demand they let them pass, the Khajiiti woman ordered her partner into battle, along with a large force of hidden warriors who quickly surrounded them.

The soldiers who speak were not near Arientia when this occurred, and many of the soldiers who were had since fallen to the bandits. However, they describe the Khajiit as best they can. Their somewhat vague description fits Daro'veera almost perfectly. Nish's blood boils and he feels his face flush with rage. He turns to the fire, realizing that many of these men and women may very well have traveled to Mundus early as a direct result of his freeing the slave girl. The guilt weighs on his conscience even heavier than the pain of her betrayal on his heart.

When the battle began, the Khajiiti woman watched from a distance, as though she were enjoying a play. The battle seemed to favor the bandits as they quickly slew the caravanners, and even some of the highly trained and heavily armored Cheydinhal guards. When the mysterious Nord suddenly ran into the fray, the Suthay-Raht sprang to her feet and fled the scene, taking her pet Imperial with her. By now, Fjorn sits and listens to the soldier's story, as does Arientia. Arientia confirms their description of the woman, adding to the image of the bandit's leader. Fjorn regrets

never seeing a Khajiit in the battle at all, save for Jo'dehki, as he was focused on his nearest enemies.

Nish lowers his head, resting it on his palms with his elbows against his legs. Words can't express the shame and culpability that he feels for her actions. Arientia seems quite puzzled by how personally the spellsword is reacting to their story. She leans closer to Jo'dehki and quietly asks him what is wrong with his companion. Jo'dehki, ever eager to speak, spares no details as he spends the next several minutes regaling Arientia and the two soldiers with Daro'veera's story. They sit there and listen, captivated by the somewhat brief adventure, and Nish's pseudoromance with the cold-hearted bandit queen.

"That's quite a tale!" A soldier comments.

"Indeed. That was a very cruel thing that she did, although I cannot say that I'm at all surprised." Arientia remarks.

"You don't like the Khajiit, do you?" Fjorn asks.

"Oh, it's not that. The Khajiit are not much different from any man or mer in Tamriel. Women, however, regardless of race, are quite conniving and devious when they want to be. The greatest actor isn't so believable, and the largest dragon no match for their ferocity. They'll cry like a child, and then devour you like a hungry lion when you approach to comfort them." Arientia replies.

"This one has never heard a woman speak so derisively about her own gender before." Jo'dehki says.

“Well, I speak from experience.” Arientia retorts, gazing at him. “That was quite foolish of you for being so trusting. You shouldn’t soon forget that life lesson.” She turns to Nish.

“... I won’t.” Nish murmurs, staring at the roaring fire.

“If we see her, Jo’dehki will gladly run her through for what she did to his closest friend.” The Khajiit adds.

“By all means... A shame that you had to be rewarded so harshly for freeing a slave, though.” Arientia laments.

“You dislike slavery?” Jo’dehki raises a brow.

“Of course. As detestable a practice as necromancy. Only the barbaric and weak perform such acts.” She replies.

“How noble for an Imperial soldier.” Fjorn mutters.

As they watch the fire burn brightly, the shapes of the dead within it are clearly visible. Arientia asks the trio if they would accompany them to the Imperial City, as they were already heading there. The travelers promptly agree. The few remaining merchants in the caravan collect their scattered cargo while the soldiers stand guard. Fjorn, having treated all of their wounds with his magic and modest supply of potions, is closely guarded by the soldiers. He walks near the center of the caravan; he is the only member with such an extensive medical knowledge among them. Ra’kanishu walks with Fjorn. Arientia leads the caravan with several soldiers, while Jo’dehki walks beside her, at her request. Who is he to deny her?

"I'm not used to looking up to a Khajiit." Arientia suddenly speaks, breaking the silence.

"You will grow used to it. Honestly, this one finds it strange to look Fjorn in the eyes." Jo'dehki remarks.

"So... Do all Cathay-Raht use bows?" She asks.

"When it suits them." He replies.

"As big and strong as you are, I had assumed that the Cathay would be more inclined to close combat... Like a pretty feline Nord." She coos.

"Jo'dehki would have preferred 'handsome'." He chuckles.

"My apologies." She says softly, narrowing her eyes.

"This one uses a bow because he does not like to be injured... Unless it's claw marks, and only on his back." He winks.

Arientia's lips curl into a visible grin, though her face flushes.

"Well... I was quite fond of sparring with my partners, both outside *and* inside." She winks back.

"Are you interested in Jo'dehki?" He asks her outright.

"Well I... Um..." She hesitates.

"Because if you are, you should know that Jo'dehki is very open minded, and he always tries his very best... When sparring."

"Really now?" Arientia bites her bottom lip.

Fjorn and Nish walk with the new leader of the caravan, the fifth in line and the only surviving family member of the caravan's founder.

"Pardon me, miss." Nish begins, speaking to the young Imperial woman who now leads the merchants.

"Pecia Ceceld." She replies.

"Pecia Ceceld, you're traveling all of the way to Anvil?" He asks.

"Yes. We are going to barter passage on a ship to Auridon once we arrive. That was the original plan anyway." Pecia answers.

"Interesting..." Nish scratches his cheek.

Ra'kanishu turns to Fjorn, looking rather expectantly at the Nord. He looks back, raising an eyebrow in confusion at the Imperial.

"Oh no... I told you how it's going to be. Imperial City, and then I'm joining the Fighters Guild." Fjorn finally says.

"Are you sure?" Nish asks.

"... Very..."

"Alright..." Nish shrugs. "This is probably a foolish question, but you are following the Gold Road, aren't you?" He turns back to Pecia.

“Of course. It’s a main road through Cyrodiil.” She replies.

“Well, in that case, would you mind if Jo’dehki and I joined the caravan? At least until you reach Skingrad. We can part ways once there.” He asks.

“Of course not! After what you did for us, we’d be glad to have you!” She exclaims.

“Thank you.” Nish bows his head.

“You can come with us to Auridon if you’d like...” Pécia adds.

“A flattering offer, but we’re heading to Elswyr; Reaper’s March to be more specific. We’ll take a ferry across the border near Skingrad.” Nish explains.

“Suit yourself... If you change your mind though, it’s an open offer.” She says with a warm smile.

They continue to march in relative silence. Pécia brushes her long chestnut bangs from her face as she glances over to the handsome older Imperial several times with her jade green eyes.

“So... Nish... That’s not a typical Imperial name.” Pécia begins, breaking the silence.

“It’s short for Ra’kanishu.” He casually replies.

“Now that is definitely not an Imperial name.” She looks to him with surprise.

"I know. I wasn't raised by Imperials, but adopted by a family of Khajiit. I'm returning home to them in Reaper's March." Nish explains.

"Really?! ... Is this some sort of joke? Are you lying to me?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Ahziss sajob lurma." Nish smirks.

Pecia blinks, her eyes wide in shock.

"I stand corrected. So, may I assume that means 'no'?" She giggles.

"'Dov' means no. What I said was 'I do not lie'." He adds.

"And I stand corrected again." She smiles.

"As my mother would say when we were cubs, 'delaiitay may'a'; If you never make a mistake, you will never learn." Nish replies.

"So, is that Khajiit your brother?" Pecia wonders.

"Well, sort of... From another mother." He chuckles.

"Yeah, I figured." She laughs.

Fjorn merely rolls his eyes at their dialog. Pecia seems very interested in getting to know her travel companion. She continues to barrage Nish with questions. Though they are initially rather benign, they soon grow more personal. Nish does his best to deflect them in the most polite ways possible, though Pecia is quite unphased. With every question that's not answered to her satisfaction, her

curiosity grows. Even when he does answer her directly, he fascinates her beyond words. As far as Nish is concerned, the conversation helps the time pass, if nothing else.

The long walk to the Imperial City continues without error or delay. The caravan enters the massive city as the sun begins to sink behind the horizon. They pass completely through the city before they find an inn with enough rooms for the group, and even then, many of the guards have to stay at a separate inn just down the road. Pecia and her caravan, the three travelers, Arientia, and her more elite guards stay in the same inn, renting all of the rooms on both sides of a single wing. Before they bed down for the night, they share a feast in the dining hall.

Having rented half of the inn, the innkeeper allows them to temporarily rearrange the hall. They push the tables and chairs together into long lines, forming two rows for the party to sit around. Arientia claims Jo'dehki's attention for herself, asking him to sit with her and her elite soldiers. At the second row sits Nish, Fjorn, the caravanners, and the remaining soldiers. Pecia sits at one end of the row, choosing a seat near Nish. To the spellword's silent dismay, she refuses to give him a moment's peace. Continuously probing him, she hopes to learn more about his background. Nish is patient, and quite forgiving of the rather annoying woman.

In the adjacent row, Arientia keeps Jo'dehki close. Fjorn turns back and glances over his shoulder, watching with visible disgust as the Imperial and the large breed

Khajiit ceaselessly flirt with each other. Before their dinner is even finished, the Captain and the cat rise from their seats and walk toward the hall. Her soldiers chuckle, quietly making lewd comments and hand gestures as the pair leave the row of tables. Fjorn's eyes follow them, narrowing with prejudicial malice when he sees the pair kissing passionately in the hallway. They soon disappear into Arientia's rented room, the door slamming shut behind them.

"How distasteful..." He murmurs.

"I always knew you were such a kind and understanding man." Nish flippantly remarks.

Fjorn turns in his seat to face Nish, who had been watching him for some time. The Imperial smirks at the resentful Nord.

"Mind your tongue..." Fjorn growls.

"What? Don't be upset! I'm sure once she's done playing with him, she might want someone to cuddle with... All that fur can be uncomfortably warm." Nish teases.

"I'm warning you..." Fjorn points a finger at the Imperial.

Nish mockingly points a finger back at the Nord, though his glows a faint purplish-blue; small sparks jump from the tip.

“She must have a thing for cats.” Pecia giggles.

“Pfft... Khajiit... They’re as bad as those filthy Argonians.” Fjorn grumbles.

The Nord glares at Nish, who’s expression changes from a rather pleasant grin to an upset scowl. Nish rises from his chair, placing his palms firmly on the wooden table before him. Pecia looks worried as she glances between the two.

“Two years of traveling together, and you didn’t learn a single thing from me, did you?” Nish asks.

“Just one... Never turn your back on a woman.” Fjorn smirks.

Nish smacks a clay goblet toward Fjorn, spilling the cheap wine over his armor. He then turns and storms off, while Fjorn uses an old nearby rag to dry his cuirass. He grins, chuckling rather proudly as his eyes follow the Imperial. Pecia turns and watches as Nish leaves the dining hall and exits the inn via the front door. Her lips curve into a frown. She sighs and turns back to her meal. As she eats and tries to forget the incident, she worries about the spellword, who after some time, has failed to return to the table.

“Does he do that often?” She suddenly asks Fjorn.

“Only when I insult ‘his kind’.” The Nord chuckles. “Don’t worry. The confused Imperial will be back soon enough.”

After a pause, she turns back to the doorway. She cannot help herself and stands from the table, walking away from Fjorn and the caravanners. She exits the inn and walks the grounds, looking for the Imperial. The streets are barren, with only a few beggars visibly sleeping under covered stoops. The roads are dimly lit with glass encased oil lamps, while small lanterns sit atop the posts that line the short wall around the inn. She walks around the building to a garden on the rear grounds, stopping when she sees Nish sitting on a stone bench.

She tilts her head curiously, narrowing her eyes as she watches him. He clenches two objects in his hands, holding them up to his lips as if praying, while gazing up at the night sky. His eyes are fixated on Masser as he silently speaks to the articles between his palms. Pecia had never seen someone praying outside of the temples or away from the shrines before. Many do not bother when they are not in the presence of the gods. She slowly approaches the man, trying not to disturb him. When her feet crunch a twig, he spins, drawing a sword with his left hand and pointing it at the startled girl.

“Woah! It’s just me!” She exclaims, holding up her hands.

“Apologies.” Nish says as he pulls back the sword.

Pecia had never seen such a strange blade before. It is clearly of foreign design, looking like an elongated and reversed claw, and made of orichalcum, with a polished brass pommel and guard. As he sheaths the sword, the grip appears to be made of animal bone. He still clutches the objects in his hands. She can see a golden chain dangling between his fingers and glinting in the moonlight. She takes a step towards him, her head held low.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” She sheepishly asks.

Nish does not reply, but slides over on the bench and leaving a place for her beside him. Pecia sits on the stone bench, her hands resting on her legs and her eyes glancing down to his hands. Nish holds the articles tightly as he gazes up at the large red moon once more.

“I don’t mean to bother you...” She begins.

“You’ve been doing it all day.” Nish chuckles. “It’s alright. I’m a patient man.”

“Fair enough... What is it you’re doing out here?” She asks.

“Just thinking.” He replies.

“About your home?” She presses.

“Do you ever get tired of asking questions?” He asks.

“No!” She cheerfully answers.

“I was thinking about my old home, the family that remained there, and... Someone else... A woman who was once very special to me.” Nish explains.

He looks down and opens his hand, revealing the golden amulet with a modest inset ruby, the golden chain hanging between his fingers. Beside it is a golden ring with a moonstone set within it.

“These are to be gifts for her, but until then, they are loyal companions.” He continues.

“Oh... It looked like you were praying.” She somberly says.

“Yes, I suppose it would.” He smiles faintly.

He pockets the jewelry and rests his hands on his knees. They sit in silence for a few moments as he looks back up at the two moons, focusing on Masser.

“So... Do you think she ever looks up at the moons? ... Perhaps thinking about you?” She asks.

“I doubt she’s so romantic, but it’s a pleasant thought.” He chuckles. “Come... Let’s go back inside.”