

Chimerical

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Episode 19: Compunction

Jadhi sits up in her bedroll as Jo'dehki grumbles in his sleep, tossing and turning as he suffers a nightmare. Feeling quite badly for him, she rises from her place and creeps around the partition that separates the two. She sits down beside the Cathay-Raht, watching him for a moment. He mumbles, calling out to someone, asking forgiveness. Reaching a hand out to him, she rests it on his shoulder, squeezing gently. Though he does not wake up, her presence is enough and he grows calm, sleeping peacefully. She wonders what it was he was dreaming about, but she hopes that he will trust her enough to share it with her in the morning.

Waking the next morning, Jo'dehki can't get his mind off of the nightmare. He rarely dreamt of the man he had murdered, but lately he has been recalling the Bosmer. Perhaps it his proximity to Willowgrove? Jadhi drops subtle hints, first asking how he slept and then if he had any dreams worth mentioning. To her disappointment, Jo'dehki

deflects every attempt by outright lying and refusing to answer. Over the past week, Jo'dehki has been a constant companion to her and her feelings have begun to take shape; she merely wants to know that he trusts her in kind.

Jo'dehki leaves for the fields, but everyone in the household notices that he wears his weapon belt, something he hasn't done since he had begun living with the family as an adult ward. Jadhi doesn't press the matter. She continues her day with her mother, S'tari. Not long after Jo'dehki leaves, Nazahn and Hiska-dar leave for the fields as well. After several hours, there is a knock at the door. S'tari opens it to see Tsanavi and Ra'kanishu standing before her. She embraces her adopted Imperial son and his Khajiit lover, welcoming them into her home.

"It is good to see you, mother." Nish begins. "Although I actually came here to see Jo'dehki. I needed to talk to him about something."

"Oh, that's fine, Ra. Any excuse to see my boy is good enough." She grins. "Although, Jo'dehki left for the fields hours ago."

"Really?" Tsanavi asks in surprise. "We were just there."

"Yes." Nish nods. "We spent the morning reseeding after the last harvest. Jo'dehki never arrived."

The family speculates as to where Jo'dehki went to, and why he would not tell them honestly. Jadhi, in her earnest desire to help, shares Jo'dehki's previous nightmare.

Nish immediately has his suspicions. Jadhi presses him for answers, almost desperate in her attempt to learn what is going on. She grips Nish's arms as she pleads with him. Her startled Imperial brother glances to his Khajiit sister. He had no idea that she cared so much, and neither did anyone else in the family. Thoroughly embarrassed, Jadhi pulls away and apologizes to Nish.

He is certain that his nightmare probably had something to do with the only thing that has ever troubled his best friend, the murder he committed in Willowgrove. Though he has his suspicions, he is unwilling to worry her. He comes up with a lie as quickly as he can, explaining that Jo'dehki simply had family friends in a nearby village and must have wanted to visit them. Giving his sister a comforting hug, he tells her not to worry, and that Jo'dehki will return. Tsanavi joins in, helping calm Jadhi frazzled nerves. The couple look to each other as they comfort Nish's sister.

He has never lied to Tsanavi, sharing everything with her whenever she asks him. She knows about the murder, and is as concerned as her lover, their gazes confirming it. With Jadhi calmed and their visit complete, the couple leave the home and head back to their own, their communal work already done for the day.

"Ra, what do you think we should do?" Tsanavi asks.

"If Jo'dehki doesn't return by nightfall... I suppose we can go look for him. Hopefully he won't need 'help'." He replies.

Though he doesn't say it, they both know what he is referring to; neither of them wants to risk breaking him from a prison cell, though they would if they had too. Jo'dehki sees the sign alongside the road, pointing toward Willowgrove. His heart pounds as he contemplates every potential possibility of what might happen when he enters. Will he be recognized? Will he be immediately arrested? Will anyone even remember or care? Though his conscience doesn't agree, Jo'dehki himself prefers the latter possibility. He gulps nervously, coiling his clawed fingers as he approaches the village.

He enters the small village, looking around for anyone who may be familiar to him. Though he used to spend quite a bit of time there in the past, everything but the houses seem different. It certainly isn't the same town that he left so many years ago. He wanders the road, stopping a Khajiiti female.

"Pardon me miss. Do you know an Aleron Oakrock?"

"Who?" She looks confused.

Apologizing for bothering her, he moves on. He spots a Bosmer, thinking he may know his victim.

"Sir, this one apologizes for the bother, but he is looking for an Aleron Oakrock. Do you know him?"

"Who?" The wood elf raises an eyebrow.

Asking several more people, Jo'dehki is surprised that no one recalls the man. In the past, Aleron was quite popular. He seemed to bed a different woman every night, which is an incredible feat for a village as small as Willowgrove. The well-dressed Bosmer was a professional gambler, among other things. Jo'dehki had smuggled cargo for him in a desperate attempt to join his "gang", which only consisted of Aleron himself and one close friend, whose name he cannot remember. After successfully transporting a sack containing fifty vials of skooma, a task he was disgusted to carry out, Aleron not only did not induct him into his gang, but never paid him.

Angered, the young Jo'dehki found the man in the bar. The orphaned Khajiit, though still underage and not fully grown, took it upon himself to claim what was rightfully his. He can still recall the burning anger he felt when Aleron laughed in his face and tossed him a half-eaten sweetroll, telling him to accept his fee. In front of the patrons of the bar, he stabbed the Bosmer in the neck, who was eye level with the younger Cathay-Raht. His friend did not even bother to help, merely running away in fear. Taking his coin purse and an uneaten leg of lamb, Jo'dehki fled on foot and used the coin to keep himself alive and barter passage out of Elsweyr.

Having asked several random villagers, Jo'dehki sits on a fallen log that has since been carved into a bench. He turns his eyes toward the tavern, finally deciding that it would be as good a place as any to ask around. Entering the tavern, few people are inside. Only the bartender and

three patrons populate the space, all of them sitting alone. He approaches a Khajiit patron, standing beside him for a moment.

“Pardon this one, but do you know Aleron Oakrock?”

“No, but there is a dagger that this one is acquainted with. Would you like to get to know it?” The patron snarls.

“Not really.” Jo’dehki replies, taking a step back.

“Good. He wouldn’t like you either, so keep walking.”

Looking around the bar, he tries an older Bosmer female, taking a more subtle approach. He takes a seat across from her.

“May this one buy you a drink?”

“Of course you can.” She grins.

“This one is looking for Aleron Oakrock. Have you heard of him?”

“I can’t say that I have, but maybe I’ll remember if you... Accompany me to my home. Privacy jogs my memory.” She coos.

“Oh... Uh... This one is quite ill and does not think that would be a good idea.”

“At my age, I don’t care, just so long as the little one works.” She laughs.

“Little?!” He exclaims in offense.

“Ooh... You don’t say.” She winks.

Left speechless, confused, and uncomfortable, he leaves her a coin as promised before rising from the seat. He turns to the last remaining patron, glancing back over his shoulder at the older wood elf woman. She blows him a kiss. He quickly heads for the last patron, the token Redguard foreigner. Stopping, Jo'dehki immediately realizes that asking the Redguard would be less than futile. He heads for the bar, approaching the attractive Bosmer bartender who looks to be a little older than himself.

“One of your strongest whatever, please.”

“Alright. Drowning the embarrassment?” She asks.

“What?!” He looks to her with wide eyes.

“Degnaen.” She motions with her head to the older Bosmer. “She’s never rejected a man yet. You’re the first.”

“This one would never... Forget it.” He sighs.

“It’s alright.” The bartender laughs.

“She’s not my type, but you are.” He grins.

“I don’t sleep with customers.”

“Who said that we would be sleeping?” He winks.

“If you don’t want to wear your next drink and still pay for it...” She glares.

“Apologies.”

He rests his cheek in the palm of a hand, his elbow on the table as he slowly takes a drink from his wooden tankard.

“What are you even doing in here?” She asks him curiously.

“This one is looking for Aleron Oakrock.”

The bartender stops in her tracks, staring with wide eyes at the large breed Khajiit. He turns his eyes to her, sitting upright as he sees her expression.

“Did you know him?”

“Of course I did. He was my brother.” She grumbles. “I’m Celewen.”

“Oh...”

“He’s dead. Has been for years. What did you want with him?”

“In truth, this one did not want anything from him. He is looking for relatives.” Jo’dehki explains.

“Well you found one.”

“Would you be able to speak with me, preferably in private?”

She looks over to him, noting the expression on his face and the sincerity in his eyes. Celewen gives him a subtle nod before leaving the bar, bringing him into a back room.

Closing the door, she quickly turns to the Khajiit, who stands at least two heads taller than her. He sits against a crate, lowering himself to her level.

“What’s going on?” She asks.

“This one is called Jo’dehki. Have you heard of me?”

“No. Should I have?” She raises an eyebrow.

Jo’dehki lowers his head, covering his eyes with one hand as he takes a deep breath. He is speaking to a female that he could easily snap in half, and yet he has never been so afraid in his entire life. He is more afraid than he was on the night he killed her brother.

“This one killed Aleron.” He finally blurts out.

“What?!” She chuckles.

“It’s true.” He nods. “Years ago, when Jo’dehki was but a cub he was orphaned. He wanted to prove himself to Aleron, whom he looked up to, but Aleron used him to smuggle skooma and wouldn’t pay him. He mocked this one to his face and in front of others, and he lost his temper. Jo’dehki stabbed Aleron to death in this very tavern, stole his money and fled.”

She stares at the Khajiit, her mouth hanging open in shock as he accurately describes her brother’s murder. Jo’dehki is visibly distraught as he pleads with her for forgiveness.

“Jo’dehki is so sorry for what he did. He should not have killed Aleron. It was not his place to do so. He does not wish to be imprisoned or executed, but he cannot live with the guilt any longer.”

Celewen reaches out a balled fist, slowly opening her fingers and resting it on Jo’dehki’s cheek. She leans in, hugging the surprised Khajiit. He is left dumbfounded by her behavior.

“I have long hoped to meet you.” She begins.

“For what reason?”

“Aleron was a cruel man, and the man who killed him... The boy who killed him, freed me from his grasp.” She explains.

“Wasn’t Aleron popular? He was always with women every night.” Jo’dehki reasons.

“Wealth makes men popular, and it also makes buying women easy, but he wasn’t a good man. He made you sell, a Khajiit, sell skooma! He probably hoped you would be curious enough to use it and become addicted. Aleron slept with nearly every woman in town, but not all of them were willing. I wasn’t.” She admits shamefully.

Jo’dehki cannot believe his ears. Aleron molested his own sister?!

“After our mother died, Aleron inherited her fortune. It corrupted him. It didn’t take long before he saw me as less a sister and more a slave, then I just became a woman for him to use whenever others rejected him, or his coin purse was empty... Don’t feel bad for him. You gave him what he deserved and did me a favor. With what little he left me, I bought this tavern and have a good life now.” Celewen says, her eyes watering.

Jo’dehki did not anticipate a realistic scenario where he would not be in trouble, let alone praised for the murder. Though he is unsure how he feels about it, knowing how cruel Aleron was toward his own sister makes it easier to accept. Celewen gives him another hug before kissing the side of his broad snout.

“Thank you. You were my personal angel.” She smiles.

“So Jo’dehki is not in trouble?”

“Hah! No!” She chuckles. “In fact, I’m going to name a drink after you now that I know your name. Maybe a white wine and ale mix?” She thinks aloud.

She opens the door to the back room, presenting the bar to him. Jo’dehki enters the main room, setting down several more coins than the cost of his drink.

“Wait, Jo’dehki! This is too much!”

He turns back, grinning at her.

“No, it isn’t. You are a very good bartender.” He says.

With a polite wave, he leaves the bar, closing the door behind him as he looks at the center of Willowgrove. The weight on his heart has been lifted, and he walks down the road with a spring in his step. He wonders if fate has a hand in all things. For years he thought that killing Aleron Oakrock was a horrible thing, but for the town of Willowgrove and Celewen, it was a blessing from the eight. Perhaps the other ills he had done had a positive effect? As he contemplates his life, walking down the road toward S’ren-ja, he wonders if this is the feeling that always made Ra’kanishu behave so well toward others.