

A character in dark, ornate armor with skulls and red eyes, holding a book. The character is wearing a hooded cloak and a crown-like headpiece with a skull. The armor is intricately detailed with bones and skulls. The background is a dark green with faint, glowing yellow patterns.

DIABLO Sanctum of Bone

A SHORT STORY BY
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Sanctum of Bone



Upon the backs of stormy winds, the tortured screams escaped the moors of Scosglen like shrieks bursting from the knotted tree line. They were nothing like the howls of lycan myth that had come to plague the moors. No, these were cries of an unnatural sort. This was the sound of unjust death, of innocent blood spilled upon tainted soil. The place was the sanctum, and its headmaster preyed upon Sanctuary's most vulnerable—the poor and wandering children.

I, Tejal, have heard the echoes of their cries in my dreams. I will tell you the story of their origin, but be warned, for this tale is treacherous as it expounds upon the legend of how a most fearsome set of armor came to be.

While the one who imbued it with righteous service to the Balance ultimately came to bear its heavy burden, this armor's rotted seed runs bone-deep. Quietly

now, light a candle and gather closely as I uproot the armor's decrepit past. Thin is the veil that separates the craving for knowledge and the hunger for power . . .



Iolaynah stared out at the sanctum below, standing sentinel over the Scosglen moors, overtaken though it was by the towering trees encircling the dark stone walls. Tree roots erupted from the ground, cracking the walkway beneath the arched iron entrance.

Iolaynah stepped carefully. Rumors had placed the sanctum on the periphery of the moors, but as she stood staring up at the imposing castle, it looked more like an outcropping of Scosglen than a place for study built along its edge.

"I'm here, Lorameere," Iolaynah whispered. She had traveled far to find her sister, and she wouldn't let anything stand against her.

Lorameere was barely a toddler when she was taken into Iolaynah's traveling caravan as a refugee, raised alongside Iolaynah by her father. A band of misfit entertainers, their troupe performed for the local taverners, sea-haggard sailors, and awestruck children, who squinted to discern sleight of hand from true magic.

Iolaynah and Lorameere never spent more than a few hours apart in their years as a little family. Thieves had taken their father from them years ago in a raid that decimated their troupe. They buried his remains among the oil pits of Kehjistan, the only funeral two little girls with no father could make, and each took an inheritance—her father's prized dagger with the jewel embedded deep in its hilt for Iolaynah, and a green silk bow for Lorameere, the one that had belonged to Iolaynah's mother. They were even closer then, these twice-orphaned sisters, traveling with the troupe, performing their act. Until Lorameere went away to study at the sanctum one year ago. Until her letter announcing her arrival six months later.

Until the silence that followed.

Iolaynah's first rap of the heavy brass knocker went unanswered. She strained to hear rustlings of life inside the imposing castle. She knocked again but was met with only an echo of the clang.

Stepping back, she tried peering into the small square windows, but they

were too few and deeply inset, giving the illusion of hooded, unblinking eyes. Abandoning the knocker, Iolaynah balled her hand into a fist and pounded hard. This time, the door gave way.

Stepping into a dim foyer, Iolaynah expected to look upon the gilded furnishings and elegant carvings of some esteemed house of learning. Instead, she could scarcely breathe through the layers of decay and mold. The same roots breaking through the walkway outside had pried open the mortar between the stones in the walls. Vines twisted along the rails adorning a grand staircase, writhing snakes frozen in time. A damp chill had settled so deeply in the air, Iolaynah scarcely recognized she had left the outdoors; inside, it was as cold and dark as night.

With an echoing thud, the wooden door shut, and when Iolaynah turned, she gasped to find a stooped, hooded figure standing behind her. She reached for the hilt of her dagger tucked snugly in its leather sheath at her waist. At closer glance, she relaxed her grip; the boy wasn't a threat. If anything, he was afraid of *her*.

The ragged cloak hung about his thin form like a rag on a cross in a cornfield. His spine was twisted, and though his face was wreathed in shadow, Iolaynah could still make out the hollowness of his cheeks, his sunken eyes, his teeth protruding against dry, cracked lips. A map of fine scars traced their way across his pale, exposed skin.

"I-I thank you for your hospitality," Iolaynah stuttered. Where in the Hells had she let Lorameere be taken to?

The boy avoided her eyes, instead glancing nervously around the foyer. Iolaynah followed his gaze, but all she could see beyond the dust and moldering rafters were shadowy corridors to nowhere.

When the boy said nothing, Iolaynah forced herself to recall the story she had planned to tell.

"Tapestries!" she said abruptly. "I come bearing tapestries. Or rather, my mistress has sent me from Kehjistan to the finest castles and cities in search of buyers for our rare and luxurious textiles. Might I speak with—"

"*Leave!*" the boy hissed, lunging at Iolaynah with frightening speed, grasping her arm and pushing her toward the heavy door. "You must leave here at once!"

"What are you—I don't understand," Iolaynah protested, struggling against the boy's frantic efforts.

"You should never have come!" the boy whispered. He was leaning his entire pathetic weight on her now, but he was no match for Iolaynah. Whatever ill fortune had befallen this boy, she wasn't about to let it happen to Lorameere too.

"I'm looking for my friend," she whispered back to the boy, dropping the ruse. "She's tall, much taller than me," she said, "with long black hair she wears in a braid with a green ribbon. Always with a green ribbon. Her name is Lorameere. Please, you must tell me if you know her—"

"Go!" The boy's desperation was tangible.

Suddenly, he dropped Iolaynah's arm and stepped away from her, lowering his gaze.

"Elden, you should have told me we had a visitor," said a voice deep enough to fill the cavernous space of the foyer.

The boy shook violently at the sound of the cloaked figure looming at the top of the grand staircase.

A mercurial aura followed the man as he descended the stairs. His finely appointed robes covered every inch of his skin—even his hands—but his hood remained at the back of his neck, exposing a warm face split by a wide smile.

"My apologies for the intrusion." Iolaynah bowed. "I am but a humble merchant who would be grateful for a night's stay and some nourishment, if the headmaster would be amenable to such a request."

The man laughed. "I assure you, the headmaster would insist you take refuge here for the night."

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the man gripped the knob of the banister in a way that reminded her of the grip she had so often held on the knife in her sheath. The banister's ornament was orb-shaped and ivory-colored, identical to the one on the opposite banister, precisely the size of the man's fist. Smooth as a finely formed skull.

"Are you certain?" Iolaynah asked warily. "Perhaps I should inquire directly," she pressed.

If anyone knows what's become of Lorameere, Iolaynah thought, it will be the headmaster. He was, after all, the one who had penned her invitation to study here.

The man in the silk cloak took Iolaynah's hand.

"Headmaster Droman Grigso. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Iolaynah forced a smile to her lips, stunned into silence. Lorameere had spoken

much of Grigso, the sanctum's headmaster and founder, before she left. Surely his age would far exceed that of the person who approached her now, a man of no more than thirty by Iolaynah's estimate. Releasing her hand, Grigso moved on to the trembling boy beside her.

"Elden, I believe you're needed in the greenhouse," the headmaster said calmly.

"Sir, i-if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could I show our guest to her q-q-quarters first?"

"Now, Elden . . ." The headmaster placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed.

Iolaynah realized with a growing dread that the control Grigso had over the boy was absolute. Elden offered no further protest. He simply turned on his heel, loosened his clenched fists, and walked down one of the long, dark corridors leading away from the foyer, disappearing into the shadows.

Grigso smiled. "My apologies for the interruption."

"It's no trouble!" Iolaynah tittered, remembering her story. "I come to you on behalf of my mistress, the finest tapestry weaver in Kurast. She heard tell that your fine sanctum was perhaps in need of . . ." Here, Iolaynah trod carefully, worried she would offend the headmaster.

Grigso grinned. "About restoring this house of learning to its former glory?"

Iolaynah wanted to be comforted by the headmaster's smile. If only the light of it had reached his eyes. Yet just as the whole of the castle lurked in shadow, so too did Grigso's countenance. She suspected there was more hiding behind Grigso's smile than there was in the endless hallways winding throughout the sanctum.

Iolaynah demurred. "Perhaps the scholars here would benefit from a reinvigorated interior."

Grigso's smile remained, but his eyes searched her, and she worried she had left some part of herself exposed. Had he seen through her ruse?

"Surely you know our numbers have . . . waned over the years," Grigso said slowly. "Such a shame," he said, shaking his head. "So few minds touched with that rare combination of natural magical ability and the curiosity to test its limits."

Iolaynah cleared her throat. "Yes, such a shame, Headmaster."

Silence thickened between them.

To her relief, Grigso turned away, heading back up the grand staircase as he set

forth a proposal. "I'm inclined to entertain your offer," he said as Iolaynah followed behind him.

"You would be interested in fabrics, then? Some damask silks? Perhaps I can look around to get a feel for the decor. You needn't accompany me. Surely you have more important—"

"We can discuss specifics later," Grigso answered, leading her to the highest level of the sanctum. "You were right to seek lodging here. The night grows dark, and it would be imprudent to journey at this late hour. We have more than enough space in our students' quarters."

"That's very kind of you," Iolaynah might have said had she not been so distracted by the scene before her: The corridor he gestured toward was wholly abandoned.

It was evident this darkened, cobwebbed hall hadn't been used in months . . . maybe years. The musty stench alone betrayed its neglect and seclusion from the rest of the sanctum.

From where Iolaynah stood, it looked as though the only door that wasn't covered in cobwebs was the one to their immediate left—the one Droman Grigso was unlocking with the key he pulled from the folds of his robe.

Before he could unlock the door, a distant but unmistakable scream echoed through the castle, cracking the silence that blanketed the corridor.

Iolaynah sucked in a sharp breath, instinctively reaching for her dagger.

To her surprise, Grigso merely chuckled.


"Dreadful, aren't they? Awful wailings. I thought I'd go mad when I first heard them."

"Where are they coming from? Is someone—"

Grigso coolly dismissed her. "Some sort of creature from the moors, I assume. Another unfortunate by-product of our proximity to such an unsavory place," he lamented. "Beasts baying at the bloody moon or some nonsense."

The dormitory door swung open to a sloped stone floor and a small, spare room furnished with a straw-stuffed mattress, a table with a basin, an empty wardrobe in the corner, and a window with a view obscured entirely by an imposing tree trunk directly outside.

Iolaynah stepped cautiously into the room. She could feel Grigso's eyes on her back. She approached her next question with care. "Are many of the chambers occupied?"



THERE REMAINED NOT A SINGLE
DOUBT IN HER MIND THAT
LORAMEERE WAS IN TERRIBLE
DANGER, WHEREVER SHE WAS
IN THE ENORMOUS CASTLE.

A pause long enough to grow uncomfortable followed, and Iolaynah eventually turned to face the headmaster. That same empty smile. The same hollow eyes. Iolaynah suppressed a shiver.

"A few here and there. You've met Elden, of course," Grigso replied, still grinning. "We like to keep our finest minds close at hand to . . . keep the conversation well nourished. A starved mind dies a slow death."

Iolaynah nodded, again noting the perfectly smooth skin framing his features.

The second Grigso closed the door behind him, Iolaynah collapsed onto the bare mattress, filling her lungs with the musty air of the tiny room. She couldn't remember feeling such relief as she did the second she was out of the headmaster's company. There remained not a single doubt in her mind that Lorameere was in terrible danger, wherever she was in the enormous castle. From the little she'd seen of the sanctum, the long, winding corridors could number in the dozens. It could take her weeks to search the entirety of the place. If she had any hope of finding Lorameere, she needed a sign, something to point her in the right direction.

She stepped toward the window and put her fingertips to the glass, then slid them to the gnarled branch that had wound its way inside, surprised by the warmth of it despite the chill that permeated the air outside. Pressing her face to the pane, she looked down to discover it wasn't a branch at all, but a stray root that had erupted from the ground and climbed the wall of the castle. Holding her fingers to the root, she swore she could feel a thumping deep within its core.

No, not a thumping . . . a *pulsing*. Like a heartbeat.

Iolaynah snatched her hand away.

"Lorameere," Iolaynah whispered. "Show me where you are. Show me how to find you."

Suddenly, a low groan beside Iolaynah stopped her racing heart, and from the

corner of her eye, she saw the door of the wardrobe slowly hang farther open.

Iolaynah crept toward the open wardrobe, but when she peered inside, she found only an empty wooden closet.

Perhaps she's in one of the other chambers, Iolaynah thought.

Carefully, she peered down the hallway, then quietly tried the neighboring door. The knob refused to turn, so she slid her dagger from its sheath and freed the spindle from its hold.

The scene inside was a cobwebbed tomb from some unknown time. The scattered papers on the table lay under a thick pile of dust, the basin beside the bed was cracked and dry, and the mattress smelled of mildew. Secured to the stone wall by an invading root was a framed portrait of two girls, arms encircling each other, cheeks pressed together as they smiled.

"Which one of them was you?" she asked the room.

Crossing the hall, she pried the lock open to the next dormitory and found a similar scene, this room clearly abandoned as hastily as the previous one: tomes played across the bed, a pile of unfolded clothes in a corner, a half-finished meal, now only petrified remnants.

Iolaynah had seen enough. She backed out of the room, easing the door shut behind her. Just as she turned to slink back to her room, Iolaynah gasped. Disappearing into the doorway to her room was a long green ribbon at the tail of a black waist-length braid.

Iolaynah crossed the corridor in three leaps, but when she entered her room, she found it as empty as she'd left it.

"Lorameere?"

She searched the dormitory frantically, opening and closing the wardrobe, ducking under the table, peering out the sealed window—all of them impossible places for Lorameere to hide, but *she had seen her*. She was certain of it.

Just as Iolaynah prepared to look over the landing of the grand staircase, she was met at the top of the steps by a shrouded, pale face.

"Oh! Elden, you startled—Did Lorameere pass you just now on the stairs? She must have!"

"The headmaster would enjoy your company in the dining hall for supper," he said flatly.

Iolaynah tried to understand. Had he not heard her? “Elden, I need your help. I think she’s in terrible danger!” She stared hard at the boy, whose eyes were lost in the shadows of his cloak.

His voice betrayed not an ounce of life. “The headmaster will expect you at half eight.”

With that, Elden turned, and with his limping gait, made his pained way down the grand staircase before the dark swallowed him back up once again.



The table was set for two: one end for Grigso, the other for Iolaynah. Elden finished placing covered dishes before them, then departed.

“Just us, then?” Iolaynah asked as she took her seat in an upholstered high-backed chair. “I’d hoped perhaps some scholars or students might be joining us.”

She struggled to keep her tone casual, but she was still vibrating from her near encounter with Lorameere. She was certain she’d seen her.

Grigso’s hollow smile spread across his face as he locked eyes with Iolaynah.

“I took the liberty of choosing tonight’s menu,” he said, pointedly ignoring her comment. “I trust it will be to your satisfaction.”

Testing her luck, Iolaynah tried a different angle.

“These invasive roots have made quite a mess of your tapestries,” she said, gesturing toward the walls with their cracked mortar and their serpentine intruders. “Perhaps your young protégé, Elden, might show me the areas of the sanctum in need of the most attention—”

To her astonishment, Grigso burst into bellowing laughter.

“Dear girl, are you still playing at that charade?” Grigso taunted, dabbing at the corners of his eyes with his cloak.

Iolaynah swallowed hard, waiting to see what Grigso would do next. She only dared exhale when Grigso smoothly lifted his wineglass to take a drink, set the glass back down, then uncovered his dish. The steam from the food before him made the air shimmer.

“Please.” He gestured to her to do the same as the steam dissipated.

She slowly lifted her own covering and waited for the food to cool, fork in hand. She recognized the smooth handle of the cutlery immediately—it felt just like holding her father’s dagger. Staring down at her place setting, she saw the handles of the knife and spoon laid before her, like the fork, were carved of the same smooth ivory as the ornaments decorating the heads of the banisters. The stems of the wineglasses too.

When the steam from her plate cleared, Iolaynah saw what lay before her. She forced herself to stare at it, to smile through her teeth, masking her revulsion.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice quieter than she’d meant for it to be.

“Jellied cuttlefish ink sac atop a bed of boiled local greens,” he rattled off casually. “Those roots of which you just spoke, in fact,” he mused. “They are indeed invasive, though I must say, their persistence is impressive. I find myself continuing to count their uses.”

Something in Grigso’s tone made Iolaynah doubt he was referring to the roots’ nutritional value. Besides, they were the least offensive offering on the plate. The jelly bore a horrifying likeness to the very oil pits by which Lorameere and Iolaynah had held their father’s meager funeral. Rare meat sat in piles speared by their own sharp bones, tiny as toothpicks in some places, sharp enough to slice her throat if she swallowed them. Watery blood pooled to the plate’s edge.

“Did you know that the northern saw-toothed venomous shrew eats nearly three times her body weight?” Grigso mused, forking a mouthful of the rare shrew meat into his mouth. A dribble of blood rolled down his chin.

Iolaynah’s stomach churned as she thought she identified a tiny hindquarter tangled amid the roots on her dish.

“Remarkable little creatures. They’ve been known to keep their prey alive whilst feeding on them for up to three weeks,” he continued, never breaking eye contact with Iolaynah.

Remember why you’re here, she told herself. *Remember Lorameere.*

“Fascinating,” Iolaynah said, playing along. “I recall you mentioning to Elden a greenhouse onsite as well. For the study of . . . local flora? Herbal remedies? Perhaps that’s what occupies your students now?”

Fine if he knows I’m no merchant, she thought. *So long as he realizes I’m no fool, either. We both know this place is anything but a sanctum.*

Grigso's eyes widened, and he leaned forward, licking his lips.

"How very observant of you, my dear," he said, tilting his head slowly. "Aren't you the clever one?"

Iolaynah's stomach tightened, but she returned his smile with only a slow blink.

"Is it possible I've discovered your true reason for seeking an audience with me?" he posited. "You wouldn't be the first 'wayward traveler' to cross my path. My dear, if you wanted to study under my tutelage, you needn't have gone to such lengths."

Grigso chuckled as he ate, but Iolaynah feigned contrition. She recognized an opportunity when she saw one.

"I would offer my apologies, Headmaster, but might I be bold enough to assume I'm forgiven? Seeing as you've been so kind as to share your table with me?"

Grigso took a long draw from his wineglass. Iolaynah watched as his Adam's apple slid up and down his smooth, uncreased neck.

"I'll accept your apology in exchange for your name."

"Iolaynah," she admitted. She had nothing to lose in revealing that much.

"And in answer to your question," he continued, "we do indeed pay close attention to the living and dying of things here. I wonder, have you ever thought it . . . arbitrary? How fleeting the existence for one life, how lasting for another? How quickly a promising life can be snatched away before its full potential is reached, by way of anomaly? A venomous mammal. The swing of a scythe. The curse of a deadly ailment. Tell me," he continued, his voice echoing in Iolaynah's ears, "have you never witnessed the long fingers of life close too soon around someone you love?"

Her father's dagger. The hole in the ground between the Kehjistani oil pits. Their pitiful funeral for such a great man.

"Such is the way of the Balance," she said, but they felt like someone else's words.

"Ah yes," Grigso said slowly. "The Balance. Yet have you never wondered why such important matters—the length of one's life—should be left to mere chance?"

For a moment, the sound of Droman Grigso's voice receded as Iolaynah's heartbeat thrummed hard in her ears.

No, she realized with horror. *Not my heartbeat.*

It was the collective heartbeat within the tangled roots twisting through the sanctum walls that she was hearing.

IOLAYNAH'S STOMACH
TWISTED INTO A KNOT.
"IT ISN'T TOO LATE. TELL
ME WHERE TO FIND HER."

Iolaynah was so consumed by the thrumming heartbeat and violent visions of her past that she scarcely noticed Elden return to the dining hall. Only Grigso's sharp reprimand broke her disquieting hypnosis.

"You fool!" he hissed at Elden, who flinched under the headmaster's scolding.

"I'm sorry, sir. I think they're only a little burnt," Elden said, trembling.

Grigso shoved him away. "I must check on our tartes." He frowned. "It seems they've spent a bit too long over the fire."

Iolaynah opened her mouth to decline the dessert and spare poor Elden, but Grigso was gone before she could say a word. To her shock, Elden sprinted toward Iolaynah the moment Grigso disappeared, pulling her out of the dining hall and into a dark alcove.

"It was Lorameere you saw," he said breathlessly. "If she'd waited, I might have—but now he's caught her and—"

"Elden, slow down." Iolaynah took the boy by his bony shoulders.

Elden shook his head in quick snaps. "There isn't time. She'll be dead by morning. She should have waited for me to help her."

Iolaynah's stomach twisted into a knot. "It isn't too late. Tell me where to find her."

"The wardrobe in your room," he said. "I can distract him while you—"

Elden's eyes widened as they fixed on something. Iolaynah spun around, but when she couldn't see anything behind her, she turned back to find the boy backed against a far wall, slinking away from her.

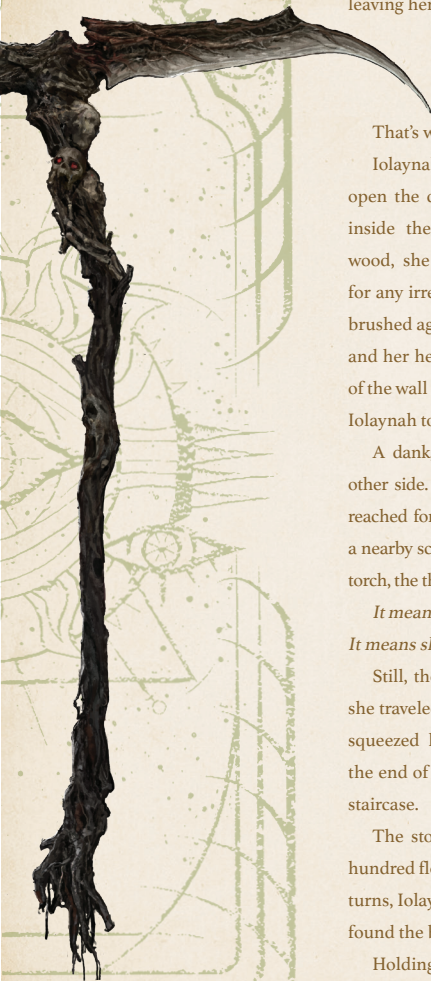
"What is it?" she asked Elden.

"You're the same as him," he said, his voice cracking.

"Who?"

Then she followed his gaze to her waistband and found her sheathed dagger. Still, she struggled to understand.

"Elden, it's for protection. You can't believe I would want to hurt you—"



"You're like him!" he cried, and before lolaynah could say another word, Elden fled into the shadows, leaving her alone and confused.

She briefly considered running after him, but what if there wasn't time?

She'll be dead by morning.

That's what Elden had said.

lolaynah raced up the grand staircase, swinging open the door to her room and this time stepping inside the wardrobe. Groping the roughly hewn wood, she slid her fingers back and forth, feeling for any irregularity in the fittings. At last, her thumb brushed against a strange curvature on the back wall, and her heart leapt as she felt a tiny latch. A section of the wall fell, creating a hole barely wide enough for lolaynah to wriggle through on her stomach.

A dank, narrow passage greeted lolaynah on the other side. The smell of mold clung to the air as she reached for the single torch, already lit and resting in a nearby sconce on the wall. She was disquieted by the torch, the thought that it was there, waiting for her.

It means Lorameere left it for you, she told herself. It means she's still alive.

Still, the passage only grew narrower the farther she traveled, squeezing her heart like how the tunnel squeezed her shoulders, until finally, she reached the end of the corridor and found a steeply winding staircase.

The stone staircase spiraled for what felt like a hundred floors. Between the mildew and the dizzying turns, lolaynah nearly wretched twice before her feet found the bottom.

Holding her torch high to light the bowels of the

sanctum, Iolaynah did wretch this time. Because what she found at the bottom of the staircase was a catacomb.

Hollow eye sockets and bared teeth haunted her in scattered rows, intersected by bones of all shapes and lengths, varying yellows and browns and states of decay. Tree roots had woven their way through the sockets of the skulls like serpents wrapping prey in a deadly embrace.

This place, this supposed sanctum of learning, was a house of death.

Still she continued, rounding the first corner as it bent to the right, and any worries that she was being led astray fell to pieces. On the path before her lay a small green ribbon, a few long, black hairs tangled in the knot at the center of a loosened bow.

Iolaynah crouched to retrieve the satin ribbon. "I'm coming, Lorameere."

At last, the path of skulls and bones and roots halted at a small arched door, behind which emanated the sounds she could no longer deny were coming from the sanctum. Slowly, she opened the door to a fresh nightmare, and the true sources of the wailing screams unfolded.

A high-ceilinged dungeon towered above her, but these walls weren't the scattered bones and skulls of the ancient dead; these were the whole husks of hundreds of lives torn from their bodies. Mummified into grotesque rigor mortis and twisted with the agony of their final breaths, these human shells stood stacked between mortar and the snaking roots of the moors. From every corner, she could see the slow stages of death hard at work on what were once the students of the sanctum.

Against one wall, bound tightly to the human husks by pulsating roots, a man of no more than thirty years was splayed half-alive, his skin already putrefying. He was still alive to feel the piercing of the roots' needles, though, and the torturously long process of organic decay. On an adjacent wall, a young girl hung suspended by her ankles, dehydrated like an old bouquet of flowers, blackened and leathery, but to Iolaynah's horror, still blinking. On yet another wall, Iolaynah could see the legs and torso of a young boy, his upper body wrapped tightly in a ball of knotted roots; the only evidence he still breathed was the twitching of his small feet in midair.

In the center of the dungeon stood a pedestal, atop which sat a wooden trophy carved from the severed trunk of a tree. The statuette's jagged edges formed a cracked ribcage around a collection of yellowed skulls, each a face frozen in eternal

agony. Roped with a totem of ivory and two copper bells, the macabre trophy was one that struck a deep memory in Iolaynah, one too ancient for her mind to retrieve.

"I had hoped to have a bit more time with you before this moment, Iolaynah," said a voice behind her.

Droman Grigso stepped from the shadows of the dungeon's entrance, shrugging off his fine robes. Flanking his shoulders at sharp angles was an iron-fused armor. Fists closed at the breastbone, and where there should have been shoulder plates, tiny skulls formed hard epaulettes, and a matching skull glared straight ahead at the point of a molded helmet attached to the shoulder piece, transforming Droman Grigso into an iron beast uprooted from the poisonous soils of the Deep Hells.

Iolaynah swallowed. "How do you know me? Why was Lorameere invited here?"

A low, menacing laugh trickled from Grigso's mouth, and Iolaynah suddenly realized how eerily silent the echoing dungeon had become. Grigso's presence had the ability to snuff out even the sounds of death.

"With your hand on the hilt of your father's bone dagger, you still ask such questions," he mocked.

Iolaynah's thumb traced the jeweled hilt that had imbued her with her father's strength after so many years of needing him, of aching at the memory of his funeral.

"Bone dagger?" she whispered.

Iolaynah unsheathed her weapon, which brought a ghoulish smile to his lips.

"He never told you what he was," Grigso whispered.

"H-He never told me—" Iolaynah stumbled. It couldn't be true.

Except she knew it was. In a deep, unreachable place inside of her, she had always known what he was. What *she* was.

"Your father, you, me, we're the same," Droman Grigso said, his voice soft through his hollow smile.

The word hung unspoken between them: *necromancer*.

"My father was nothing like you, and neither am I," she spat. "This is not what the Priests of Rathma taught," she cried, her voice breaking as she looked upon the room. "They bring Balance to Sanctuary. Life *and* death. What is it *you* bring? Chaos? *Suffering*?"

Grigso's smile fell, and he slowly shook his head. "You continue to disappoint,"

he said, then turned to the murky dungeon entrance. "Your Lorameere figured it out long ago."

Iolaynah's heart squeezed as a pale, bent Lorameere emerged from the shadows.

Iolaynah lunged for her sister, but Grigso withdrew a long scythe from behind his back, slicing it through the air between them, missing Iolaynah with the tip of its crescent by inches.

Lorameere's gaze never left the ground. Her once dewy skin cracked, and her bones jutted at sharp angles. She swayed slowly in place, and when Iolaynah looked at her feet, she understood it was because her body was nearly petrified from the knees down.

The husked remains lining the walls. The trophy in the middle of the room with its tortured faces. The slow death that permeated the sanctum.

Iolaynah looked up at Droman Grigso, barely able to say the words: "You're life-tapping these people."

Grigso lowered his scythe and took a step toward Iolaynah, but she raised her bone dagger, and he held his hands up in a mock show of truce.

"Tell me, girl," he baited her, "for all your supposed devotion to the Balance, what have you ever done to serve it? Had you known you possessed necromantic gifts, would you have raised the dead in service to your precious Balance? Your father—what of his contribution? Would you like to know what Lorameere would have done?"

Iolaynah flinched.


"She would have reanimated your father." Grigso smiled at her, clearly savoring Iolaynah's confusion. "Ah yes, returned to that pit in the oil sands. All to see you smile again. To be a family again . . . no matter how twisted."

Iolaynah glared at Grigso. "She never would have wanted that if she'd known the cost."

Grigso suddenly struck the butt of his scythe on the stone floor. "I tire of your self-righteousness, girl. I'd held some hope you might be among one of the promising students I used to reanimate in the early times."

Iolaynah looked again to the morbid trophy on the pedestal behind her.

"Theirs were the brightest minds to pass through these halls. I knew that if any lives could add back the years stolen from me, it would be theirs. Alas, their bodies eventually failed too."



TEARING AT HER WITH THEIR
CRACKED, ROTTED NAILS, THE
PETRIFIED BODIES SCRAPED AND
BIT AT IOLAYNAH, OVERCOMING
HER BEFORE SHE COULD TAKE A
SINGLE SWING.

Iolaynah gazed upon the rows of husks, the half-living creatures tangled in roots . . . her nearly lost Lorameere.

“You had no right.” She choked back tears.

“*They* had no right,” Grigso bellowed, his voice crackling through the dungeon. “The Priests of Rathma would curse me with such knowledge only to damn me with this horrid sickness! I tell you this: no student who has crossed the threshold of this sanctum has ever borne the agony I bear, but I’ll make sure you suffer your share of it before I take your life.”

With thunderous force, Grigso swung his scythe into the wall, sinking it into one of the living roots snaking its way through the husks. Once pierced, the root reached for Lorameere.

“Look out!” Iolaynah screamed, lunging, but as she did, the row of corpses restrained by the roots fell forward, reanimated by the strike of Grigso’s scythe.

Tearing at her with their cracked, rotted nails, the petrified bodies scraped and bit at Iolaynah, overcoming her before she could take a single swing. She could feel the twist of each joint, the pull of each muscle. Then came the crushing weight, dozens of bodies piling atop her as they squeezed the air from Iolaynah’s lungs. Through a space in the bodies, she could see a writhing Lorameere’s last ounces of life draining from her body as the root gripped tighter, all while Droman Grigso looked on.

Behind him, a quivering Elden crouched in the shadows.

Grigso doesn’t see him.

There’s still a chance, Iolaynah thought. She heard crackling, felt the agonizing pop of her ribs breaking under the weight of flailing dead bodies. Her vision began to fade . . .

If she'd just waited for me. *That's what Elden had said. There's still a chance. Help Lorameere, Elden. Please, I can't—*



The Kehjistani sun was hot on Iolaynah's face. The smell of her father was cedarwood and tobacco.

"You've grown," he said, his voice rich and real in her ear. "You handle the dagger well. The sapphire eye follows you. It knows you're now its owner."

Iolaynah stared at the hilt of the dagger. "I wish it still belonged to you," she said sadly, wiping the tear trickling down her cheek.

"It was my time," he said. "The Balance required it."

"Why did you never tell me?" she asked him without looking up. She feared if she did, he would no longer be there.

He was quiet for a while. Then, slowly, he said, "Sometimes, we must learn in our own way. Sometimes, we must learn with pain."

Iolaynah considered his answer. "Why?"

"Pain teaches us what matters most."

Iolaynah shook her head. "But what if . . . those who truly mattered to me are lost? When does the pain cease?"

Her father did not answer. When she looked up, she was alone.



Iolaynah gasped awake, but the claws of death kept her firmly on the dungeon floor.

"There, there, girl," Droman Grigso cooed, his rank breath warm on her face.

She tried to recoil from him, but every muscle in Iolaynah's body screamed in agony. The headmaster's army of corpses had receded. The thorny roots slithering from the wall's crevices were winding and piercing deep, bloody grooves into her skin, leaving her too weak to stand.

"That's it. Calm yourself. Let it heal you," his voice wafted. "This is how you were destined to use your power, Iolaynah."

When her eyes regained their focus, it was upon a green silk ribbon lying beside her. Iolaynah stared at it for several long seconds before she recognized the brittle black hair tangled through it, cupped in her twitching hand. Curled into a C facing her was her dearest Lorameere, the same root binding them, pulling the last drops of life from Lorameere to bring Iolaynah back to life.

"Please, make it stop," Lorameere begged, one last tear trickling down her withering face.

"Grigso, I give my life for hers!" Iolaynah pleaded, but Grigso slammed his fists upon the trophy pedestal.

"If you're still too stubborn to see your greater potential, then you deserve to die alongside her!"

My dagger. If only I could reach my dagger to cut away the roots, thought Iolaynah. But the bindings were too tight. The light was nearly gone from Lorameere's eyes.

Suddenly, a feral, unearthly scream echoed through the dungeon, and a sickening *squelch* filled the air.

"What have you done?" Iolaynah heard Grigso yell.

The roots around her arms loosened, and she heard the *clink* of her dagger land on the ground beneath her. Iolaynah wriggled her hand to the hilt and grasped it hard, sawing frantically, feeling sap smear over her as she freed herself. Just as she moved to free Lorameere, she saw Grigso shove Elden away from the scythe he'd wrenched into the source of the roots.

"Iolaynah!" Elden screamed, and she ducked as the scythe swung inches above her head.

Tumbling to the opposite side of Grigso, Iolaynah faced off against the headmaster, her dagger like a toy against his armor and bladed staff.

"How does it feel, Iolaynah, to have your dear Lorameere's lifeblood running through your veins?"

But there was someone else's blood running through Iolaynah, whose blood was never poisoned by Droman Grigso and his betrayal of the Balance or the teachings of Rathma.

"She joins my father's blood," Iolaynah said, gripping the bone dagger in her fist. "And with it, I will restore the Balance you have desecrated."

Iolaynah slashed her dagger at the binding root holding the nearest wall of corpses in place. Grigso stumbled back as if struck. In that moment, Iolaynah aimed the sharp blade tip straight between the closed fists at his armor's heart. With a *crack*, she felt her dagger pierce the iron, slipping between Grigso's ribs to his soft insides.

A hideous cry escaped him then, and as she bore down and twisted her blade deeper, she leaned close to his face, enjoying the first glimmer of fear in his eyes.

"How does it feel?" she raged, teeth clenched, "as the lives you stole drain from your body?"

Even through his agony, Grigso smiled, his mouth filling with blood. "I gave them new life through me. Don't you see? We are what the Priests of Rathma fear most—not guardians, but deciders of the Balance."

Grigso winced as his face and hands wrinkled to their true age. Still, he spoke:

"It is not too late for you, Iolaynah. Think of your father and sister, of all the great minds you could rebirth in this world. Surely they deserve a second chance."

Droman Grigso's eyes fluttered, and he sputtered a last bloody cough before grasping Iolaynah's hand over the hilt of her dagger.

Choking, he whispered, "Dear Iolaynah. I've made a student of you yet. Oh, how painful such a truth must be to you."

With this last swipe at her heart, Droman Grigso plunged the dagger straight through, carrying Iolaynah's hands with it, pulling the hilt deep inside the hot cavity of his own chest until she felt the blade puncture the ground underneath.

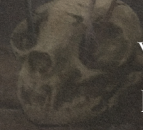
Droman Grigso was dead.

Her hands still dripping with Grigso's blood, Iolaynah walked slowly to the limp body of her sweet Lorameere. Elden lay beside her, his tiny body trembling with silent tears. She was his reason for living too.

Weaving the once-silky black hair into a loose braid, Iolaynah tied the green ribbon to the end, placing it gently over Lorameere's shoulder.

She pressed her cheek to Lorameere's, her sister already cold to the touch, but she let the tears flow while she cursed the High Heavens.

"Why her? Why would you take her? If there is a Balance and I'm meant to keep



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it, why would you take everyone who ties me to it?"

She wept until night turned to day and turned again to night, then kissed Lorameere once more on her cold forehead.

"You were my very last tether," she whispered to her sister, then turned to Elden, who had not moved from Lorameere's side.

"Bury her in the light," Iolaynah said.

The harness slipped easily from Droman Grigso's limp shoulders, and the helmet rested heavily on her head. Iolaynah would need them to hold her firmly to the ground as she walked alone through the doors of the sanctum and toward the shore of the Twin Seas.



It was Iolaynah, the girl from Kehjistan, who seized on Droman Grigso's moment of weakness and drove her father's bone dagger blade through his heart. Aware of her latent powers for mere minutes and barely alive with only the lifeblood of her sister to keep her standing, Iolaynah silenced the screams emanating from the sanctum at the edge of the Scosglen moors once and for all. But her win was far from victorious, for every anchor that had once held her in place—her beloved sister, the truth of her father, her belief in the Balance—was no more.

Cursed to walk the remainder of her days with the blood of her sister flowing through her veins, those who dared to get close enough spoke of a warrior who woke nightly from tortured dreams and performed endless acts of unanswered

penance. She gripped the hilt of her fabled bone dagger with every exhale, its jeweled tip always staring up at her. Unpracticed at speaking, she grew nearly wordless over the years, choosing instead to watch, allowing a cloak of dark silence to settle upon her shoulders as heavily as the armor she refused to remove, the skulls staring into nothingness as lolaynah bore her gaze into the soul of anyone studying her own countenance for long enough.

Her anchors' chains severed, it is said that lolaynah was forever after unmoored.

I, Tejal, see the warrior in my dreams, a girl who sometimes ages, sometimes remains the young woman who first set upon the sanctum to unveil Droman Grigso for the rogue he was. In my visions, she is a fearsome sister, a terrified orphan, a bloodied and battered soldier for the Balance, a solitary wanderer. She is a necromancer. She is lolaynah, who dons the armor forged from the Sanctum of Bone.



About the Author

CARLY ANNE WEST is the author of several works of spooky fiction for readers of all ages, with titles including *The Murmurings* and *The Bargaining* (Simon Pulse), and the forthcoming series *The Ghosts of Nameless Island* (Andrews McMeel). Her works also include the *Hello Neighbor* series (Scholastic), based on the fan favorite video game, as well as contributions to the *New York Times* bestselling *Five Nights at Freddy's* literary universe (Scholastic), based on the wildly popular video game of the same name. Carly holds an MFA in English and writing from Mills College and lives in Seoul, Korea, with her family.



TEJAL HAS MANY
TALES TO TELL.

MORE SHORT STORIES

FROM THE HEDAJI

ARE COMING SOON . . .