"Hurry up, you wench," Nusha hissed.

Nusha had been waiting in the cellar for almost an hour now, curled up between two crates like a viper around her eggs. The air was frosty and dank, poison to the Argonian's cold blood, and she dug her rake-like claws into her palm to stay alert.

Above her, an argument raged between husband and wife. The woman had been stomping around the place when Nusha arrived, banging drawers and cupboards as if it were the End of Times. Her husband, Nusha's mark, woke up soon after, and they had been arguing ever since. Screeching, throwing things, slamming doors.

It was enough to make anyone swear off romance for good.

Svaknal Asgariksen seemed like an easy target at first. If someone merely wanted him dead, they only needed wait until he drank himself into Oblivion, or for his debts to catch up with him.

But the client wanted the amulet that hung around his neck at all times, and Svaknal's time was quickly running out. As Nusha had been told, at any moment a horde of moneylenders, vicious Orcs, would be knocking at his door, hungry for blood and coin. The amulet had to be taken before that could happen.

Nusha had endured the mockery of her peers, waited patiently for years so she could prove them wrong. And now, thanks to this idiotic woman, she was going to fail her first mission.

The fighting upstairs reached a crescendo. Nusha tensed, daggers held in each hand, ready to move. The wife shouted something in a foreign tongue, and a loud *BOOM* followed.

Silence filled the house.

Nusha shuffled the daggers in her hand, waiting for a sign to ascend. All she could hear was the ragged breathing of the wife.

She wasn't to be harmed. That was part of the brief. And if the woman saw Nusha, she risked revealing her identity to a mundane. But at this rate, the moneylenders would get to Svaknal before Nusha could. There was no choice.

She slipped out from between the two crates and sprinted up the stairs.

At the last moment, the door opened, spilling wan light onto Nusha's face. A tall, elven silhouette appeared before her. There was no time to respond, and Nusha ran straight into the plum-skinned woman, bouncing backwards and tumbling down the stairs.

"By the Mad Queen!"

Nusha scrambled to her feet. Her daggers had been knocked out of her hands, and now she searched for them in the dark of the cellar. The Dunmer woman who had opened the door stood dumbfounded at the entrance to the cellar. She filled almost the entire door frame, dressed in a Nordic jerkin and trousers, a leather satchel slung over her shoulder. Her face seemed to rest by default on an imperious scowl, and her accent betrayed her status as an immigrant from Morrowind.

"What are you doing in my house? I'll call the guards!"

"I wouldn't do that," said Nusha, rescuing a dagger from a pile of old linen.

In reality, she was panicking. Once she got her daggers back, she would high tail it out of there. But she needed to get this Dark Elf off her back first.

"I was only here to kill your husband."

No point in lying, Nusha supposed. And this woman didn't seem particularly fond of her husband, either.

"Well, I've just killed him myself."

"What?"

Nusha spun round and snapped her teeth. This Dunmer wench had stolen *her* kill?!

"Yes. It seems all those years training Destruction magic were not wasted!"

She was proud of her achievement. So much so, that she seemed to temporarily forget that Nusha was a stranger hiding in her cellar. The Argonian took the opportunity to retrieve her second dagger from beneath a crate.

Despite her appearance, she had killed somebody. Nusha wondered briefly if meeting this Dunmer was part of the prophecy, her intended path. Had Sithis, in his paternal wisdom, arranged

their meeting, and if so, why? It was in Nusha's interest to find out more about this woman, even if she did desert her in the end.

"Where is the amulet?" Nusha asked, putting on her best attempt at a friendly tone of voice.

"You mean this?"

The woman pulled out a bright-red amulet from under her shirt.

"Yes. Please give it to me."

"And why should I do that?"

"I will spare your life."

The woman laughed. "I fear no Argonian. Your kind are all the same: spineless adders slinking through the grass."

Nusha pulled out her dagger and aimed for the girl's throat. Contract be damned, she would not be insulted like this.

A loud banging came from upstairs.

"Open up, Svaknal! We know you're in there!"

"What's that? Oh no, it's those Orcs!"

"Tell you what," Nusha said, "I'll help you escape Bruma, keep you safe from the Orcs, *if* you give me the amulet."

The Dunmer wrung her hands and chewed her lip. "Fine! It's probably not worth anything, anyway. But don't turn your back on me once we're out, assassin. My family is of great repute in Morrowind, and I can assure you will pay for any damage done to me."

She marched down the stairs like a schoolteacher come to rap Nusha on the knuckles. Nusha could barely conceal a mocking grin.

"What is your name?"

"Nusha. And yours, milady?"

"I am Karme Arenim of House Hlaalu. I am—"

Another bang came from upstairs, and it sounded like the front door was starting to cave.

"No time for that. Let's move."

Nusha clambered up the ladder out of the cellar and they emerged into the frosty evening air. Nusha couldn't wait to return to the warmer climes of Blackwood.

"We need to—"

She stopped short, jumping forward and narrowly missing the swing of an axe aimed at her head. She rolled over to see the assailant: an Orc clad in heavy armour. He opened his mouth to cry out to his comrades, but Karme stuck out her hand and stuttered some words, and a gauzy white haze spread into the air, wrapping around the Orc. He froze, dropped his axe, and fell to the ground in a clatter of steel.

Nusha got up to examine him. His eyes were still half-open, and his limbs jutted out stiffly at odd angles. A paralysis spell.

"You're better than I expected."

"I told you, I killed Svaknal single-handedly!"

"I thought that was a fluke."

Karme rolled her eyes. "Are we going to escape or keep bickering here until an Orc chops us down?"

"The moneylenders are everywhere," Nusha muttered. "We'll have to escape over one of the city walls. Follow me, and don't make a sound."

Nusha ducked and ran across the road towards the chapel, hopping over the stone wall into the graveyard. Karme fumbled behind her, almost tripping on the path. Nusha motioned to some bushes behind a mausoleum and they crawled inside.

"Now what?" Karme whispered.

"Now we wait."

Something Nusha took for granted was torture for the Dark Elf, who within minutes was already whining of cramps and boredom. Nusha was sorely tempted to toss her out with a bow on her head for the Orcs to find, but the faint glimmer of the amulet stayed her.

Nusha had failed to kill the mark, but she could still complete her mission. And maybe this girl could be a candidate for the Dark Brotherhood, if Nusha managed to put up with her for that long.

"How are we going to climb the wall, anyway?"

Karme's whisper woke Nusha from her thoughts. Along

with her pitch-black scales, she'd been blessed with sturdy claws that made climbing walls a piece of cake. Karme's nails, on the other hand, were clean and dainty, as if they'd never seen a day's work.

"I'll be back in a minute," Nusha said, crawling out of the bushes.

She snuck out of the graveyard, ducking behind walls to avoid the Orcs who patrolled the town. In a barrel behind a shop she found some rope, and with her prize in hand she returned to their hiding spot.

They waited several more hours, until one-by-one the candles and hearth fires of Bruma were put out, and the town fell into an exquisite inky blackness. The stars were brighter here than anywhere Nusha had seen before, but they didn't have time to sit and stare at them.

She turned to Karme and nudged her awake.

"Come on," Nusha whispered, climbing out of the bushes.

There was no reason she couldn't just threaten Karme, take the trinket at knifepoint, and leave her there in the graveyard. That wouldn't technically be disregarding the rules of the contract. But there was something about this situation that felt like more than mere chance to Nusha. It was the same heady feeling she'd gotten when Sithis came to her, gave her the vision that changed her life. And who was she to disobey the will of the Night Father?

Besides, Nusha had made a deal with her. And the last thing she wanted was to prove correct this snobby Dunmer's racist stereotypes.

They crept up to the western wall. Nusha found a slightly weathered section, slung the rope over her shoulder, and dug her claws into the crevices. She then proceeded to crawl up the wall like a spider. Her dark-pigmented scales let her blend easily into the night. If any guards looked, all they would see was a smear of shadow.

Nusha waited just below the rampart for a guard to pass. She then flipped over and landed silently on her toes. She threw the rope down and hauled Karme up, struggling at her weight.

Compared to the tall, broad-shouldered Dark Elf, Nusha was minuscule. After a few minutes of straining Karme stood beside her.

Over Karme's shoulder Nusha saw the orange glow that signalled an approaching guard. There was no time to climb down. She pointed to a pile of snow lying on the other side and shoved Karme off before she could protest, jumping after her.

The snow swallowed Nusha up to her neck. She clawed her way out of it and helped Karme, who was spluttering and spitting snow out of her mouth.

"You could've given me some warning!"

"Shh!"

Nusha ducked low, dragging the Dunmer down with her. Above, a guard leant over the edge of the wall, searching for the source of the noise. An agonising minute passed, until the guard left and they could creep away.

"You don't have an ounce of survival instinct in you, do you? Now, I helped you get out of Bruma. Hand over the amulet."

Karme sighed and pulled at the chain. It caught on her neck, and she tried again. But for some reason, however hard she pulled, whichever way she moved it, the amulet would not go over her head.

"I can't take it off."

"Let me have a go at that," Nusha muttered, taking it from her hands. She didn't have time to be wasting like this.

But Karme hadn't been joking around. There was an odd quality to the chain, as if it shrank every time someone tried to remove it.

"Ow! Will you stop that?"

"Let me try and cut it off."

"*I'll* try it. Don't trust you to not chop my head off."

Nusha reluctantly handed her dagger over and the girl sawed at the chain. It was hopeless, though. Whatever magic prevented the amulet from being removed also protected the chain.

The only way to get it off would be to kill her, Nusha reckoned.

"I'm sorry," Karme said, "but you're just going to have to leave without this amulet."

"Oh no, I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Excuse me?"

"You're coming with me. To the Dark Brotherhood."

A look of surprise, then disgust, flickered on Karme's face.

"The Dark Brotherhood? I would rather strip naked and go skipping through Skyrim than go there. So that's where you're from. Figures. A Morag Tong assassin wouldn't be so hapless as to let someone else take their mark."

"I don't care what your opinion of the Dark Brotherhood is. I was tasked to retrieve that amulet, and Sithis help me, I will."

Nusha hardly had the most glowing opinion of the Brotherhood herself. As a Shadowscale, growing up in the halls of the Dark Priory, she had seen its uglier sides. But there was no way she was going to let her first mission be a complete failure.

"Besides," she said in a husky voice, "you'll need some way to survive now that you're on the run. You could be quite a competent killer if you put your mind to it."

Karme stuck her nose up. "The Dark Brotherhood is for gold-hungry lowlives."

"And how do you expect to get by now that you've killed your husband? I doubt that satchel is overflowing with coins."

She tightened the grip around her bag. "Look, I don't care how desperate you are for new recruits, I am *not* going to the Dark Brotherhood!"

Nusha squinted at her. Her claws itched to dig into this prim little missy's throat, but she suppressed the urge.

"Fine, then. We'll part ways. I'm sure you've got a mansion waiting for you in the Imperial City, and a tent and rations in that travelling bag of yours. I'm sure you know to avoid the main roads, which the moneylenders will be searching for your dearly departed husband, and I'm *sure* you know how to make your way through the Jerall Mountains. How foolish I was to ever doubt the abilities of Karme Arenim, renowned sorceress and ethical assassin!"

Nusha didn't wait for a response, but simply turned away

and marched into the forest. She'd let the stupid girl get killed by a bear and take the amulet off her cold, dead body.