

Karme was many things, but a quitter was not one of them. She would make it through these godforsaken mountains and prove that charcoal-scaled Argonian wrong.

Truthfully, she wasn't sure where she was going. The plan had been to leave Bruma by the main road, slip out before anyone found out about Svaknal (not that Karme thought people would care; she was doing the town a favour, really), and head to Cheydinhal. There she would petition the help of Count Andel Indarys, who, as a fellow immigrant from Morrowind, from House Hlaalu no less, would be compelled by her tearjerking story to give her board and lodging. And if the good count so desired, she might even work, putting her education and upbringing to good use.

Of course, this was all fancy, and Karme knew this. Traipsing through pine trees, dressed in commoner clothes, her stomach growled like a wolf, and she knew that she was in for some truly hard times. But the image of the sneer on that Argonian's face, and the fear of the moneylenders and guards that would come after her if she gave in, kept her going.

Karme stopped by a stream to refill her waterskin and rest. She had been making slow progress, and she supposed it was now midnight. If she tried to sleep here, with no tent, she'd freeze to death, or be gobbled up by a wolf. So she would keep going.

The problem was, Karme had no idea whether she was going the right way. She searched vainly in the sky for the constellations that would guide her, wishing she'd paid more attention to her tutor when he rambled on about the cosmos.

Karme was about to continue when her eye caught on something. A few metres away from the stream there was a log. She was sure she had seen this exact log before, almost an hour ago. She stood up, walked around the clearing, and it slowly dawned on her that she had been to this exact place already.

"Oh, fireblood!"

She kicked the log and crouched beside it. How exactly had she lost her way? She was following one of the paths, but in the dark she must have turned back on herself.

A wolf howled in the distance, and she started to shiver.

She might be able to fight one or two off with magic, but even then, she'd probably starve before she reached civilisation.

"Need some help?"

Nusha appeared in front of her, melting out of the undergrowth. Karme jumped and cursed again.

"Have you been following me all this time? Just to laugh at me?"

"Not *just* to laugh at you. I told you, I need that amulet."

"Believe me, I'd give it to you if I could!"

The Argonian looked at her disparagingly. "There's no point in us travelling separately. Where are you heading?"

"Chorrol," she spat out.

"I can take you there, make sure you don't starve or get eaten. All I ask in return is that you at least consider going to the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary with me."

Karme sighed. She did not like to be beholden to someone, but she had no choice. "Fine. Do you know how to hunt?"

"Already taken care of." She disappeared into a bush and came back holding two rabbits.

"There are rabbits here?"

"You might've noticed had you not been stomping through the forest like that. Can you make a fire?"

Karme bit her lip. "I can try."

"What, so you can blast a man apart but not make a campfire?"

"It's not that simple!" she retorted. "I find it hard to control it, use it in small quantities."

"I'll keep that in mind. You go make a fire while I skin these."

Nusha lay the rabbits out on the log and started hacking at them with a knife. Karme felt her stomach turn, and quickly went to collect firewood. She felt stupid, scrambling about in the dark for twigs, but her hunger won out over her embarrassment.

Half-an-hour later, with only minimal burns sustained, they sat around a crackling fire, tucking into a meal of cooked rabbit. Nusha gobbled hers up in minutes, and used her sharp

teeth to scrape the bones clean, making an awful noise. Karme tried her best to nibble at her food in a dignified way, but that led to her almost dropping her dinner in the dirt, so eventually she gave up and just went for it.

Nusha asked what Karme intended to do in Chorrol, and she explained her plan to seek sanctuary. If Nusha thought it stupid, she managed to hide her derision, for once.

“I suppose you must be curious about me,” Karme said.

“Not particularly.”

Oh, how Nusha irritated her! The Argonian was licking the grease off her claws now, her expression nonchalant.

“Well, we hardly have anything else to talk about.”

Nusha turned to her. “You’re right. And it may help me to know more about you.”

Karme knew what she meant: she wanted to figure out how somebody like her had managed to kill Svaknal. She chose to take the comment as polite curiosity.

“I grew up in Morrowind, as I’m sure you have guessed, in Vivec. It’s one of the grandest cities there, an assemblage of floating mer-made islands, each housing a different canton. I led a fairly uneventful existence, that is, until a few months ago.”

Here she paused, her skin prickling with the pain of buried memories. Nusha looked faintly bored.

“My family has been in House Hlaalu for generations, and we have always been held in high esteem. Ever since the Nerevarine, though, things have gone akilter. Father voiced his opinion on the Tribunal—he is an intelligent man, a philosopher—saying that perhaps, given the coming of the Nerevarine, and the events that followed, the Tribunal are no longer as... essential as they once were.”

“He spoke out against the Tribunal?”

“Not directly,” she stressed. “My father has always been most careful with his words, and he always keeps our land’s best intentions at heart. Our House has always treaded a delicate balance. We closely aligned with the Empire, a fact that can lead those from the other Houses to distrust us. A noble of House

Redoran publicly decried what my father said, and in order to avoid serious conflict from this perceived slight against Dunmer tradition, my family was expelled from House Hlaalu.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It was horrific! Though we are lucky that they did not go for a more direct approach. It is common practice for such disagreements to be dealt with by the Morag Tong, so I suppose I should consider myself lucky that my father is still alive. But the social repercussions of our expulsion were huge! In the streets of Vivec, where friends and acquaintances once greeted me, I was met with disdain.”

Karme paused for dramatic effect, but Nusha remained untouched by the story. Karme supposed this muddy-scaled cutthroat had no friends to speak of. At least, she could not imagine who would wish to spend time with her.

“My parents wisely chose to send me to Cyrodiil, that I may find a more stable future here. We have always been in favour of the Empire, though I must admit, I expected a warmer welcome. I had decided to join the Mages’ Guild—after all, I had been tutored in magic for many years—but that blasted Hannibal Traven changed the statutes before I arrived, requiring any candidate wishing to join the guild to obtain recommendations from the chapters around Cyrodiil.”

“So you travelled around Cyrodiil?”

“I attempted to. I went to Skingrad and Chorrol before realising I didn’t stand a chance. It turns out my education in magic had not been quite as... comprehensive as I once thought. And that foul lizard in Chorrol—”

She stopped and cleared her throat. Nusha seemed entirely unperturbed by the slight. While she showed little outward reactions, Karme couldn’t help but wonder what machinations went on in her head.

“At any rate, I wound up in Bruma, penniless and at my wit’s end. I petitioned the countess for help, and she had the cheek to ask me to go on a dangerous expedition to obtain an Akaviri artefact for her!”

Karme was bending the truth a little. She had gone into the castle and boasted about her magical ability, hoping to work for her. In return, the countess had proposed she used her abilities to feed her relic-collecting habit, which Karme knew would lead to her certain death.

“With nowhere else to go, I took to the local tavern, and that’s where I met Svaknal. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

She stopped there and picked at her trousers.

“Hang on, that’s not the end of the story,” Nusha said. “How did you end up marrying Svaknal?”

“I’d rather not go into it.”

For the first time since they met, Nusha’s lips curled up into a grin. At least, Karme thought it was a grin. She had never been able to read Argonians very well, nor did she care to.

“You don’t want to talk about it because it’s embarrassing, don’t you? After all, why would a well-to-do Dunmer lady like you end up with a beer-swilling Nord?”

“Fine. I’ll tell you. He tricked me.”

“Can’t imagine that’s hard.”

Karme shot Nusha a look and she quietened down.

“He wore the amulet all the time, even when he went to sleep. He could remove it, I think, he simply never chose to. It was a family heirloom, apparently a treasure found by some adventurous ancestor of his, and he constantly boasted of its value, saying that one day he would sell it and become rich. It had become somewhat of a joke around town. I, however, was instantly taken in by his story when we met in Olav’s Tap and Tack, and I assumed he was of decent provenance to have such an object.”

“What, you really thought he was something special?”

“I was not familiar with Nordic culture at the time. I thought he was well-off, for a Nord, but I realise now that I was only comparing him with the others in the tavern and I may have misjudged. He was a smooth talker, despite his inadequacies, and after failing so miserably in my quest, I was thrilled to have somebody who would listen to me.”

“And buy you drinks.”

Karme blushed a deep aquamarine but did not deny it. “It was all a rather rushed affair, and we got married the next morning. After I—”

“Hold on, you met him, had a few drinks, and decided to tie the knot, all in one *night*?”

Karme gritted her teeth. “I had no money and no sense. Of course, now I can see it was an incredibly foolish course of action.” She stopped, wondering why she was telling the Argonian all this, anyway.

“Not as foolish as killing your husband and running away into the mountains with zero survival skills.”

Karme stood up, now fuming. “I will not take this kind of harassment!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

The Argonian was chastened, but for how long, Karme wasn’t sure. She sat back down and sulked. She usually loved to talk about herself, but this time it had backfired, reminding her of how she had utterly failed to survive in Cyrodiil. All she knew was Morrowind, and even then she had rarely left the confines of Vivec. Maybe Nusha was right, and she was a fool.

“So what’s the end of the story?” Nusha asked.

“That’s more or less the gist of it. A few weeks after marrying Svaknal, after realising he was a nobody, I decided to escape.”

Nusha moved her shoulders, in some kind of half-shrug half-shiver.

“What about you?” Karme asked. “I know nothing of your past.”

“And I’d prefer it stay that way. Nothing personal. I just like to focus on the future.”

The mood shifted, and Nusha got up, putting out the fire and fussing about in her pack. Karme felt like she had said something wrong, but after everything that had happened today, she was too exhausted to ponder it.

Besides, in a few days’ time they’d be in Chorrol, and she could be rid of Nusha. At least, she hoped. She was starting to

doubt anyone would help her, aside from this strange Argonian.