

“I request an audience with Countess Arriana Valga.”

The castle guards blinked at her. She cleared her throat and repeated herself.

“I request an audience wi—”

“We heard you the first time. But you can’t just waltz in here expecting to see the countess immediately. You’ll have to make an appointment. She’s very busy, you know.”

Karme scowled, and the right guard winced as if he expected her to scream at him.

“Fine. When is she available?”

“You’ll probably have to wait a few days.”

“A few *days*? You misunderstand, this is a matter of absolute importance.”

The guard on the left rubbed his chin. “In that case you can speak to the steward. If he deems it important enough, he’ll grant you an audience.”

“Thank you.”

One of them went to fetch the steward and she sat down on a wooden bench, preparing her speech: “My name is Karme Arenim, of House Hlaalu in Morrowind, and I—”

“I present to you Orok Gro-Ghoth, steward of Castle Chorrol.”

She jumped, having zoned out, and stood up to greet him.

“I am Karme Arenim, of House Hla...”

A male Orc of diminutive size, dressed in blue and green, stood before her.

“Yes, milady?” he said.

An *Orc*? The castle steward was an Orc? Karme laughed nervously, and bit the insides of her mouth. This was an insult, but it was an insult that she was going to have to swallow if she wanted help.

She could see the two guards she’d spoken to in the corner of her eye, whispering and sniggering about her.

“Perhaps you would like to come to my office, where we can speak more comfortably,” he said.

Karme put on her best smile and followed him through the

castle.

Once they were in his room, sat down on either side of his desk, Karme found it even harder to take him seriously. The green shirt he wore matched his skin almost perfectly, giving a strange illusion of semi-nakedness, and he looked at her with such a *serious* expression. She had never known an Orc personally, because in her experience they were stoic warriors, or lived in a muddy ditch far away from civilised society.

She cleared her throat and steeled herself. This wasn't the captive audience she had expected—the bereaved countess would surely have been much more susceptible to her emotional tale—but she would just have to make do.

“I do apologise for taking up your precious time. Only, I have nowhere else to turn...”

She began her story, emphasising the hardships she faced travelling through Cyrodiil: the banditry, the rejection at every turn from the Mages' Guild, and her arrival in Bruma, hungry and desperate. She wove the tale of how a foul Nord tricked her, and it was only with the help of a runaway Argonian slave that she was able to escape his clutches and flee to Chorrol (here she left the details sufficiently vague to avoid any association of her with the murdered Nord). Orok Gro-Ghoth remained impassive throughout. When she finished, he stretched his hands out on the table, as if weighing up several options.

“And what do you think the court of Chorrol can do for you?”

Karme cursed herself inwardly for not acting the part well enough. Surely any decent mer would see that she needed shelter?

“I only ask that you provide me a safe haven, so I am not cast out into the wilderness with nowhere left to go. I have some... talents which might prove useful, and I would gladly repay the favour however I could.”

“What talents?”

Her shy, deferent maiden role was being mercilessly countered by the Orc's straight-forward approach. Karme decided to drop it and be upfront.

“I have been educated on history, geography, astronomy, and magic, as is standard for a woman of my class.”

He perked up at the mention of magic. “We already have a castle mage, but who knows, she might be looking for an apprentice. Otherwise, I’m afraid we don’t have any use for your academic skills. Come, I’ll introduce you to our mage.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!”

“Don’t get your hopes up. She’s the solitary type. I’ll be honest with you. Your most likely bet is to find work cleaning up sick in The Grey Mare, and failing that, to get out of town. We don’t need any more homeless people or pickpockets around here. Consider that a warning.”

Karme stood up and bowed as humbly as she could, a thousand unpleasant words coming to mind. Orok Gro-Goth took her out of the office and lead her down a series of winding corridors until he reached a particular wooden door and knocked on it.

A Redguard woman with a dense afro opened the door, clearly irritated by the interruption. “What is it?”

“Chanel, this is Karme Arenim. She’s looking for work, and claims to have skills in magic. I was wondering if you might take her on as an apprentice.”

She looked Karme up and down with a critical eye. Karme couldn’t help but focus on a smudge of white paint on her cheek. She was tempted to mention her interest in art, but aside from a few years’ painting she had done as a child, she had never seriously pursued it, and she had a feeling this woman would not be impressed.

“What school do you specialise in?” Chanel asked.

“Destruction. Fire, mainly.”

Chanel rubbed her face, and then, finding the paint on it, took on a guilty look.

“I’m sorry, Orok, but I really don’t have time to be teaching children to not set themselves on fire.” She turned back to Karme and composed herself, asking in a sweeter tone, “Do you have any skills in alchemy?”

Karme opened her mouth, ready to lie, but stopped. What was the point? Her lack of ability would make itself clear within hours. She'd shunned alchemy as a child, not wanting to get her hands dirty picking mushrooms. What a fool she'd been!

"I'll take that as a no. I'm sorry, but in all honesty there's not much work to go round here. Now if you'll excuse me."

She shut the door without another word. Orok gave Karme a look of I-tried-my-best and lead her back to the foyer.

Karme whiled the rest of the day away in a similarly unsuccessful fashion. She half-followed Orok Gro-Ghoth's advice, going to the more upmarket inn, The Oak and Crosier, to ask if they had any work available. To her dismay, the well-dressed Khajiit publican eyed her with disdain and said that they "had no need for a scullery maid at this time". She didn't stoop to enter The Grey Mare, a beat-up tavern with a rough clientele, but instead enquired at the chapel, where the Primate gave her the cold shoulder.

It wasn't until Karme caught her reflection in a shop window that she realised just how grubby she looked. Her clothes were torn and dirty, and pine needles had lodged themselves in several places in her hair. She blushed, remembering how she'd marched confidently into the castle. No wonder they were so amused.

Finally, dejected and exhausted, she returned to the statue near the town gates to await Nusha. The sun was creeping lower in the sky, and citizens were already heading home from work, or stopping by at The Grey Mare, which she could see—and smell—from where she stood.

"Evening."

Karme jumped. Somehow two large Orcs had crept up beside her. With horror, she recognised them as some of the moneylenders who were after Svaknal. Had they really come all this way in search of her? She hoped her bedraggled state would act as a disguise.

"What is it?" she said. "I'm waiting for a friend."

She hoped that might deter them, but they sat down beside

her on the stone wall, leaning back casually. They were both clad in leather armour, and maces dangled menacingly at their waists. Karme cast an eye to the city gates, where two guards stood, but they weren't paying attention.

"That's a nice necklace you've got," one of the Orcs said.

"Thank you," Karme muttered.

"What brings a Dunmer to Chorrol?" the other asked.

She avoided looking at them, hoping her indifference would send them away. She had seen a fair amount of mer and beastfolk in this city, but not many Dunmer specifically. In other words, she stuck out.

"I live here," she said firmly.

"Oh really? Where in town?"

Karme grunted. "I would rather not tell you."

The Orc got up and stood in front of her, so she couldn't look away. "You look like you've been on quite a trip. You sure you're from here?"

The Orc was blocking her view of the guards, preventing her from signalling for help.

"I was foraging for mushrooms in the forest," she said. There was a noticeable quiver in her voice.

"Find any good ones?"

"Y-yes, I—"

"Excuse me."

An Altmer in a black cloak stepped between her and the Orcs, staring up at the much taller and wider man with surprising confidence.

"What do you want?"

The High Elf smiled. "I believe I overheard you talking about mushrooms. I'm quite an alchemist myself, so I thought I might enquire as to where I could find the best ingredients around here."

Karme breathed a sigh of relief. He was here to help, though the Orcs were looking at him with murderous intent, and she wasn't sure this Altmer would put up much of a fight.

"We were just leaving," one of the Orcs said.

They gave Karme a look and trudged off towards The Grey Mare.

“Thank you,” Karme said, once they were out of earshot.

“You’re very welcome. Why were those brutes accosting you?”

Karme looked down, avoiding his gaze. “Mistaken identity, I think. Some people aren’t used to seeing Dunmers. Think we all look the same.”

“A terrible plight. I find there is a huge difference in how I’m treated in the Imperial City as opposed to the less... cosmopolitan parts of Cyrodiil. The Summerset Isles are home for me. Always have, always will be.”

He spoke with a light, fey manner, giving Karme the impression that he very much liked the sound of his own voice and didn’t care whether others did as well.

“Perhaps you’d like to continue this conversation over a glass of Colovian brandy? At The Oak and Crosier, of course.”

He even held out his hand. Karme gave him a withering look.

“I’m waiting for my friend, I’m afraid. Perhaps another time.”

“Ah, yes. I am sure we will meet again. I am Landil. Landil Aelsinor.”

“Karme,” she replied. She then regretted not giving a fake name.

“A lovely name. Good evening, Karme.”

He bowed to her and headed to the inn.

“I hope we *don’t* meet again,” she muttered.

Karme shivered, and not just from the cold. The day’s light was fading, and there was still no sign of Nusha. The town was growing quiet now, with only the buzz of the inns and the murmur of the guards filling the air. Speaking of which, the two guards by the main gate were watching her. Probably wondering if she was homeless. She got up and walked behind the statue while she considered what to do.

The idea occurred to her that Nusha might have already

left, having no intention of travelling further with Karme. She couldn't blame her for that. But she thought Nusha might have at least said goodbye.

Well, there was no sense in waiting around if that was the case. She got up and headed for the city gates. Good riddance to bad company.