

This was not what Karme had expected from the Imperial City.

Why exactly they had come here, she was beginning to wonder. Nusha had been sceptical, but Karme was sure that the answer to their quandary lay within the walls of the city. Her parents had spoken of it in mythical terms when she grew up, as a place of prosperity and commerce, a crossroads for all the races of Tamriel to exchange items and ideas.

On her previous visit she had only briefly seen the sights, before going to the Arcane University to request membership in the Mages' Guild. The whitewashed story of the city had fooled her that time, but now, dragged through the loud, messy chaos of the Market District, Karme was struggling to reconcile the reality of city life with her glorified image.

She didn't understand how it could smell this bad. In Vivec, there was a complicated system of running water and sewage to ensure an acceptable level of hygiene, given the difficulties presented by the unique architecture. The Imperial City, being open to the air, would be easy to keep fresh, she thought. Instead, the Market District smelt like every horse, child, and Khajiit in Cyrodiil had done their business there.

At least inside The Feed Bag the odour of hops and the loud buzz of drunken chatter provided a distraction. They ordered two big bowls of potage, which Karme eagerly wolfed down, but it didn't hold a candle to saltrice and scuttle from home. She wondered what had become of her parents, but that line of thinking only led to despair, so she spoke to Nusha instead.

"So," she said, taking a swig of ale and grimacing at the clearly watered-down taste. "I've told you all about myself, but I still don't know much about you."

Nusha waved a claw. "Not important. I'm just a lowlife, like you said."

"I'm not taking that for an answer," Karme said. "You're a Shadowscale, aren't you? There *must* be some fascinating tales you have to tell."

Nusha choked on her drink, looking around to see if

anyone had overheard Karme. But the patrons were all wrapped up in their own conversations.

“Fine, if it’ll stop you from blurting out my identity to everyone. What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Your childhood, what it’s been like working for the Br—I mean, the organisation which you work for.”

Nusha grinned. “Svaknal was my first assignment.”

Karme gawped, and hid her face in her flagon. “So I ruined your first job?”

“Don’t worry. I would’ve messed it up somehow. I’ve always been a failure.” She stretched, cracking her knuckles. Karme wondered if she’d ever talked to anyone about her past before.

“There’s a priory, near Leyawiin, where they raise us. Those of us born under the sign of the Shadow, those that are deemed ‘worthy’, are taken away at about five years of age from Black Marsh. I was some kind of fluke. The representative who picked me out insisted there was something special about me, maybe just because of my unique colouring, but the other preceptors at the Priory all thought I was a runt.”

Karme examined Nusha more closely. Her pigmentation was uniform black, with only her amber eyes to break it up. She hadn’t supposed it was unique to her, but it made sense for an assassin.

“I didn’t exactly fit in with the others. I was bullied for most of my childhood.”

“But why?”

Nusha gave her an incredulous look. Karme didn’t understand. She had never been bullied, and Nusha seemed like the sort who could stand up for herself.

“I’m a loser, Karme. By Shadowscale standards, anyway. You’ll figure it out once you get to know me better.”

An awkward pause filled the air. Karme spoke, if only to alleviate the silence. “So what did they teach you at the priory?”

Nusha sighed. “At first we were educated in how to read and write, geography, survival skills and so on. When we reached

thirteen, we were transferred to the west wing of the Priory, where the older kids live. That's where they teach you how to kill."

"And did they stop bullying you?" Karme said hopefully.

Nusha sneered. "They figured out how to hide it better. Psychological torture instead of physical. By that time it was obvious that I was much weaker than all the others, and picking on me would've been seen as undue cruelty. I thought things might get better once we went to the west wing. I could just focus on training, block everything else out. But it was even worse. I failed at everything: archery, sneaking, alchemy. Eventually it became too much, so I ran away."

"To where?"

"To Black Marsh. I thought I might as well die in my homeland, alone, than by failing the Brotherhood. It was a ridiculous idea. I had no more idea how to survive in Black Marsh than a Nord. I walked for days, slowly starving to death, sure that it was the end. Then I came across a Hist tree."

"The Hist... They're important to Argonians, aren't they? Don't you all lick them when you come of age or something?" She blushed at her forward remarks. She had studied a little Argonian physiology, but it wasn't exactly taught with much respect or detail in Morrowind.

"Traditionally, yes, but those of us who grow up outside Black Marsh tend not to. There are various theories about how the Hist work, but it's generally accepted that we have a link to them, even if we can't feel it. This one was strong, though. When I found the Hist tree, I realised it had drawn me there, all the way from the Priory.

"I licked the sap of the tree and fell into a kind of trance. For twenty days and twenty nights I sat by that tree, meditating, hallucinating. Every few hours I would lick at it in a frenzy. I started to... go through changes."

Nusha buried her maw in her flagon, and Karme realised that for the first time, she was embarrassed.

"What kind of changes?"

Nusha gave a gravelly *harrumph*. "Outside of Black Marsh,

people have different ideas about *rixhi*. I suppose you'd call it 'sex'."

Karme frowned, unsure where this was going.

"I was born looking quite different. I went by 'Gam-Jee', a male Argonian name. When I licked the Hist, it changed me. Reformed my body. While I meditated there, my new name came to me: Nusha."

Karme nodded slowly. She had heard people joke of such things, but she had always thought of it as racist speculation. She held her tongue, not wanting to make a foolish comment.

"I also had a vision," Nusha said candidly. "It was unclear, impossible to describe. But somehow I knew it was from Sithis. We call him the Night Father. He watches over our organisation, and he was channeling himself through the Hist. He said I had a great destiny ahead of me, that I must return to the Priory and fulfil it."

Nusha finished off the dregs of her ale and leant her head against her hand.

"At least, that was what I thought at the time. I did go back, trained as hard as I could, became decent in knife-throwing and sneaking—I have a natural advantage with my looks, after all. Everyone else thought I was stupid, delusional, to think that Sithis would speak directly to *me*. But the belief kept me going, until eventually I came of age and was given my first assignment."

"And then I came in and ruined anything."

Nusha shrugged. "It was bound to happen. They were right. I didn't see Sithis. It was just a hallucination. It would've been better if I just died in Black Marsh."

"Nusha. You don't really believe that, do you?"

Nusha buried her face in her hands. "What else can I believe? I failed my first mission. I'm not cut out to do this. But I know too much to be let off alive."

Karme rubbed her thumb against her flagon uneasily. She thought she had it hard, being separated from her family and forced out of her home. But Nusha had been through so much, and it might all have been for nothing...

"I won't let them kill you."

Nusha gazed at her with bemusement. “Right. I’m sure they’ll listen to you.”

“They might, if they find out I’m the reason you failed your mission. Don’t you think?”

Karme had the feeling Nusha was about to tell her *exactly* what she thought of that, but before she could a loud cry came from the front of the tavern.

“Attention!”

A group of four Imperial battlemages had entered, and they stood in a line in beside the publican, grim expressions painted on their faces.

Half the patrons ignored them and kept on talking. The battlemage clapped his hands and an ear-piercing screech exploded through the room. All eyes turned to him.

“By order of Archmage Hannibal Traven, none may leave here until we have carried out a full search of the place. We are seeking a magical item. Its power is drawing undead creatures towards the city. If you hold the item, give yourself up now, and your life may be spared.”

The tavern exploded with noise. Several patrons jumped up and made a break for the door, only to be hit with a paralysis spell and land face-first on the grimy floor. Karme and Nusha shared a worried look, and Nusha pushed through the crowd, heading for a barmaid standing near the back. Karme hurried after her, holding her satchel tight against her chest.

“Is there a back way out?” Nusha said, holding out a fistful of Septims.

The barmaid nodded, and hurried them round to the basement door.

“What are we going to do?” Karme cried.

They walked down into the basement, past shelves and crates, until they reached a foul-smelling corner of the room. The barmaid shoved aside a crate to reveal a trapdoor.

“It leads to the sewers,” she explained. “There used to be lots of entrances, to help with maintenance. Most have been built over, but this one remains.”

“Are we *really* going to have to go traipsing through the sewers?” Karme said. A wave of nausea hit her, and she had to take several deep breaths to prepare herself for what she was about to do.

“That or we walk straight into our deaths. It doesn’t smell that bad to me.”

“Then I can only conclude that Argonians have a poor sense of smell.”

Nusha opened the trapdoor to reveal a ladder that quickly disappeared into darkness.

“Don’t suppose you know any light spells?”

“I never thought I’d *need* illumination magic.”

“Take a torch,” the barmaid said, pulling one out of a barrel and rapidly lighting it. “But be quick. Those mages might come in here at any moment.”

“Right,” Nusha said. “I’ll go first.” She climbed down in a matter of seconds.

Karme took a deep breath, whispered a prayer to Mephala, and followed her.