

Karme had never been this exhausted. In the last day they had fled from vicious skeletons, traipsed through the underbelly of the Imperial City, and were now sneaking from street to street, dodging guards and battlemages.

She had to give credit to Nusha. Sneaking was definitely her strong suit. On more than one occasion Karme had wanted to push on, slip down a street that to her looked entirely empty. Nusha simply shook her head, indicating the faint silhouette of a guard in the distance that she would have never seen. To make things worse, the battlemages had started using detect life magic to hone in on their target, and it was only by submerging themselves in sluiceways and pretending to be skeevers that they managed to avoid detection.

To get past the guarded gates separating each of the districts, they'd had to take brief detours into the sewers, stepping carefully in the dark.

By the time they reached The Copious Coinpurse the sun was beginning to rise, and the citizens, who had been locked inside homes and taverns all night, were restless, no longer willing to tolerate this disruption to their everyday routine.

Nusha knocked on the door, and a beady-eyed Bosmer opened it, demanding to know who they were.

"We're here for information," Nusha said. "About your necromancer."

Karme held up the amulet and the Wood Elf's eyes boggled. He hurried them inside and shut the door behind them.

"I really wish people would stop talking about that," he said. "I acquire my goods honestly now."

He eyed the amulet nervously as he spoke.

"We know," Nusha said. "But the necromancer you previously worked with was never caught, was he? You better tell us where to find him, before the guards arrive here and find out you're providing sanctuary to the two criminals who are threatening the city."

His eyes bulged. "So it's true? That amulet is what's causing...?" He groaned and rubbed his temples. "Very well. I can't

promise she's still there, but when I worked with Avranu, she lodged in the Elven Gardens District, in the abandoned house on the eastern edge."

Karme's heart stopped. "Avranu? She's a Dunmer?"

No true Dunmer would practise necromancy. It was a desecration of the dead, an act of pure evil. But she was far away from Morrowind now, and perhaps this *n'wah* had never had any respect for her ancestors in the first place.

"Thank you," Nusha muttered. "We'll be on our way."

"Wait," the Bosmer said.

He went into a drawer and pulled out a ring.

"This ring contains chameleon magic."

To demonstrate, he put the ring on, and he immediately disappeared. Then he reappeared, having removed it.

"It only lasts ten seconds, but it should be enough to help you get past the guards. If you hold hands it will affect you both."

Karme felt a surge of emotion. After such a dreadful night, this act of kindness from a stranger touched her deeply. "Oh, thank you!"

Nusha, on the other hand, glanced at him suspiciously. "Why are you helping us?"

The Wood Elf sighed. "I don't know what exactly your situation is, but I do know what it's like to be persecuted for something that isn't your fault. And, no offence, but you two hardly seem the types to deliberately besiege the city."

"We are most grateful," Karme said, shooting a look at Nusha. The Argonian shrugged, and they headed out into the morning light.

With the help of the ring, they were able to slip past the guards standing at the gate to the Elven Gardens District. They had to wait until another citizen passed through and slip in behind them, but within minutes they were on the other side.

The city was now bustling with life, having shaken off the paranoia and fear of last night. Karme wondered if the Akaviri soldiers had been subdued, and she felt a weight leave her chest.

"Nusha," she said, "do you think they stopped the

skeletons?”

“Unlikely. The amulet is still glowing, for one thing.”

Karme’s heart sank once more. Nusha was ever the realist, but sometimes Karme wished she could be just a tad more optimistic.

“This is it,” Nusha said, stopping outside a house. The door and window were slightly more dilapidated than the rest, but it was hard to tell it apart from the others at first glance.

“How do you know?”

“I’ve heard rumours about the abandoned house in the Elven Gardens District. That it’s haunted. I guess they weren’t too far off. Do you reckon you could blast this door open? Actually”—she gave Karme a worrisome look—“maybe that’s not a good idea.”

“We could try knocking?” Karme suggested.

Nusha grinned. “Sure, why not?”

She rapped her knuckles three times on the door. There was the sound of creaking stairs, then a low wailing, barely perceptible at first, but which grew into a mournful howl.

“Oh come on,” Nusha said. “That’s obviously fake.”

She banged on the door a few times with her fist. They heard some muttered Dunmeri oaths, and the sound of someone coming to the door.

“Who dares approach the dwelling of the Dark One?” Avranu moaned. Karme realised she was imitating the husky, shamanic speech of the Ashlanders. And doing a fairly terrible job of it.

“We require information on an amulet,” Karme said in Dunmeri, “one which is causing chaos in the city.”

Avranu hesitated, clearly not expecting to be addressed in her own tongue. It sounded like she was licking her lips, a habit Karme detested. “Very well, I will give you the information you require, on one condition. You must bring me the skull of Fevari Llenrvi.”

Karme felt a wave of unease. “Another Dunmer?”

“A child.”

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“It’s wrong!” Karme hissed. “We can’t kill a child, no matter how ‘vital’ it may be.”

Nusha didn’t respond. Karme could no longer see her face, as it was hidden behind a branch in the tree they were perching in. But she could feel Nusha’s disagreement seething out of her.

There was no way Karme would let her kill a child, a Dunmer girl, no less. If that was what Avranu needed for her to help them, they would just have to make do without her help.

Nusha had reacted to the news with a steely calmness, one that chilled Karme to the bone. She shouldn’t have been surprised; the Argonian was trained for this. But she had somehow expected that even the Dark Brotherhood would have standards.

Nusha eventually spoke. “What else can we do? They’re preventing anyone from leaving the Imperial City. We have no idea how to get rid of the amulet, and for all we know more Akaviri soldiers could be marching here from the north as we speak.”

While Karme had pondered over the moral dilemma placed before them, Nusha had collected gossip. Some palace guard had blabbed, and they were able to find out that the skeletons had not been quelled, but captured and penned in somewhere in the palace. The skeletons tried in vain to push against the walls holding them in, and they provided a compass to Karme and Nusha.

They were running out of time. Karme knew that. Guards still swarmed through the city, and they had undoubtedly pinned their location down to the Elven Gardens District.

“Does it matter?” Karme said. “Even if we find out how the amulet works, we’ll be trapped in the city.”

Nusha made a noise of discontented agreement. At least, that’s what Karme thought it meant. It could’ve just been her stomach.

“Look,” Nusha muttered softly.

Karme wasn’t sure what she meant, and tried to pick out what had caught her attention from the crowds of people below. Then she saw it.

Fevari Llenrvi could've been no older than eight, and she was skipping down the street with her parents, hand-in-hand. Karme's chest twisted in pain, at the mere thought that somebody could wish harm on such an innocent creature.

"I'm going down there," Nusha said.

"Don't!" Karme cried.

"I'm not going to harm her. I'm going to try and find another way out of this. Wait for me here."

Without another word, Nusha dropped from the tree and darted into the crowd. Karme was amazed at her ability to blend in amongst others, until she realised that she was making judicious use of the ring, activating it whenever a guard looked towards her.

Nusha didn't approach the Dunmer family, though. Karme lost sight of her eventually, but she seemed to be looking for someone else.

Karme suddenly realised how tired she was, having been up all night, and she lay back against the tree, closing her eyes. She would just take a short rest.

"Wake up," Nusha said.

Karme opened her eyes. It was dark. She bolted up and almost fell out of the tree.

"What's going on?" she muttered, rubbing her eyes.

She could only see the end of Nusha's snout from behind the branches, but the Argonian was smiling.

"I think I may have found a solution to our problem."

"Really?"

"I found out Avranu's reasons for wanting Fevari's skull. Tell me, do you think you *could* blast her door open? Without the guards seeing?"

Karme bit her lip. "We can try it with the ring."

She would've liked to have slept more, but Nusha was jumping to the ground again, and she reluctantly followed, careful to not fall as she climbed down the tree.

There seemed to be far fewer guards and battlemages about now. Perhaps they were trying other districts, or perhaps they were busy keeping the skeletons locked up. At any rate, they

were able to approach the ‘abandoned’ house without much difficulty. Karme slipped on the ring, crossed her fingers, and placed her hands on the door, focussing a blast of fire onto it.

There was a deep *thud*, muffled by the ring and the heft of the door, and it fell forward.

“Perfect,” Nusha whispered. “She’s in the basement.”

Karme wasn’t sure how Nusha knew this, but she followed the Argonian down, taking a torch and lighting it on the way.

As soon as they opened the basement door a foul stench hit their noses: dirt, rat droppings, and rotten flesh. It was almost enough to make Karme turn right around, but Nusha pressed bravely on.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Karme had to avert her eyes. The chamber was gloomy, and horrific objects hung in every corner: dissected bodies, strung up like garlic, piles of bones, some ground into dust, and a shovel covered with fresh dirt and blood.

In the centre of the room, poring over a thick tome, was Avranu. She was perhaps the most shocking of all the horrors in the room, as she was far from the hunched, witchy figure Karme had expected, and was, apart from her straggly hair, quite beautiful.

She turned round and her lips contorted into a frown, as if she hadn’t noticed them come in.

“How did you—Never mind. Did you bring it?”

“No,” Nusha said, stepping forward. “I brought this instead.”

Nusha held out a letter, and Karme wondered what on Earth was going on. Avranu snatched it from her hands and scanned it quickly. Her hands trembled, clutching the letter so hard she might tear it apart.

“This is lies!” she hissed. “Where did you get this?!”

“It was penned by Thones himself, this very day.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

Avranu leapt at Nusha, her nails jabbing at her face. Nusha calmly grabbed her wrists, and pushed her back against the table.

“You know it is true. Stop tormenting the Llenrvi family, or I will kill you. And if I find out that you have caused them trouble after I leave the Imperial City, I will not rest until you are strung up just like that corpse over there.”

Nusha’s words chilled Karme to the bone. She knew the assassin had it in her, that dark severity that one needed to take another’s life. But to see it so fresh, so venomous, reminded her of the part of her that had been able to kill Svaknal, a side of herself she feared.

Nusha let Avranu go, and the necromancer let out a dry chuckle, her hands raising in front of her to cast a spell. “You threaten *me*? Master of life and death? You do not know what forces you play with.”

In a flash Nusha was on Avranu again, one hand pushing her back onto the table, the other holding a knife to her throat. Avranu gasped.

“Funny. It seems that right now, I’m the one with the power over your life.”

To make her point, she jabbed the tip of her knife against her neck, just enough to draw blood.

Avranu scowled, and raised up her hands in surrender. “Fine. I will leave the Llenrvis alone. But I warn you, the Worms will come for you...”

“Not important. Tell us about the amulet.”

Nusha gestured to Karme, and she reluctantly stepped forward. Gingerly she pulled the amulet out. Nusha leaned back, letting Avranu go, but kept the knife close. The necromancer took the amulet in her hand, dusty and calloused from grave-digging, and Karme shivered at her touch.

“The Amulet of Bonebreath... I thought it had been lost.” Her eyes lit up with the fervour of a scholar who had seen something only spoken of in old texts come to life. “It was designed by Mishaxhi, an Akaviri commander. Clever man. It is intended for his bloodline alone.”

“What do you mean?” Karme asked. She realised she was whispering. For all Avranu’s flaws, she had a way of captivating

with her words.

“You cannot remove it, yes? The amulet has tested you, and finds your blood impure. You see, when someone of Mishaxhi’s bloodline—doubtlessly all dead by now—wears it, the soldiers obey them. In life and death everlasting. But when the amulet is wielded by one of impure blood, it draws the soldiers towards it, demanding the death of the one who would dare to steal from the Akaviri. A clever punishment.”

“But didn’t Svaknal have it before?” Nusha asked. “Why have the soldiers only come now?”

“It only started working after I killed him,” Karme said.

Avranu chewed thoughtfully on a nail. “Perhaps the magic lay dormant, requiring life energy to activate it. I could not say.”

“Regardless of that,” Karme said, suddenly wanting very much to be out of here, “how do we destroy it?”

She had decided by this point that getting it off her wasn’t enough. She wanted to make sure the wretched thing never bothered anyone ever again.

“You must return it to its owner,” Avranu said.

“Its owner?” Nusha said. “Isn’t Mishaxhi dead?”

Avranu smiled. “Yes... You may be able to return it to his body. Perhaps the amulet came back to life because he felt its presence, and he lives on somehow. Or perhaps he is gone, gone, and you will never be rid of it.”

Karme and Nusha shared an uneasy glance.

“Pale Pass is where he lies,” Avranu said.

Pale Pass. Of course. That was where the first Akaviri invasion of Tamriel was quelled, in a decisive battle. It was where the Countess of Bruma had wished her to go, to obtain some artefact for her.

“I guess we have no choice but to try,” Karme said. She was reluctant to leave without more information, but Avranu had already returned to her book, finished with her lecture.

“Fine,” Nusha said. She leant in close to Avranu. “Don’t forget our agreement.”

With that, they headed back up the stairs and out of the

house.

Karme was about to ask Nusha what the letter was about when a hand clamped over her mouth, and her wrists were pulled behind her. Harsh torchlight shone in her face, illuminating the figures of grim-faced guards.

“We found them! Take them to the prison.”