

Karme was greeted by a skeleton as soon as she stepped inside the fort. She readied a fireball realising that this one was well and truly dead. She approached carefully, in case it changed its mind, but it stayed on the ground. There was a piece of withered parchment clutched in its bony hand, and she carefully freed it.

Naturally the note was written in the language of the Akaviri invaders, and time had made the scrawled symbols practically illegible. She compared it to the untranslated diary entries, finding that the handwriting matched. This was the grisly end that the messenger had met, so close to his goal. His last few entries spoke of the wolf bite that felled him, and his last words were: "And please tell my wife, Vata, that Xhaferi will always love her."

Karme had no time for sentimentality. She pocketed the note, thinking it might be of interest to the countess, and readied herself to continue. The fort was lit by a strange blue glow, from some floating orb in the corridor ahead of her. Karme crept forward, but there were no skeletons or skeevers in this room. She examined the object. It appeared solid, but was infused with magic. The Akaviri had technology that Tamriel had still yet to master, even back then, and she marvelled that the light had remained so long. She reached a door at the end of the corridor, surrounded by statues of snakes, hissing warnings at whoever dared enter through it. Their mouths were open wide, displaying fearsome pairs of fangs.

The door opened with a loud creak and Karme winced, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the next room. A snap came from the darkness, followed by a wretched creaking, and she knew she wasn't alone.

She moved forward, slipping into a dark alcove and pressing herself against the wall. She only had so much mana, and she was going to have to use it sparingly. She waited for the skeleton to approach, its feet scratching against the old stone floor. When she saw a plume of dust kick up beside her alcove, she twisted the ring, her ears popping as the bubble of invisibility and soundlessness enveloped her. The skeleton walked past her, and

she forced herself to move, scurrying behind it until she turned a corner and the enchantment wore off.

The skeleton had been armed with a bow and arrow, and she prayed that these ones were not like the ones that had pursued them to the Imperial City. She would not be able to sneak past all of them, and if they reformed themselves, she feared she would not make it out of the fort alive.

Beside her was the door to the next room, and carved into the stone above this one was a pair of menacing, slitted eyes. She entered into the Eyes of the Serpent with her breath held.

In this room, she heard no skeleton. But she still tread carefully, sure that there were enemies in wait. Two columns stood in the centre of the main chamber, and between them sat a chest, tempting any passing adventurer to open it. It was open just a crack, and she could see the glint of a mana potion inside.

The high-pitched squeak of a skeever came from her right and she jumped. The creature bounded over to the chest, hitting an almost-invisible pressure panel as it did so. A huge, barrel-shaped mace swung down from a concealed panel in the ceiling, passing over the skeever's head and coming within inches of Karme's face.

Making sure to keep well away from the chest, Karme inched her way across the room and through the door on the other side. Two great spikes hung above the door and another pair protruded from the floor on either side, like stalagmites and stalactites. She opened the door to the Fangs of the Serpent and stepped through.

An arrow whizzed past her and imbedded itself to the wall on her right. She pressed herself against the wall beside her. Beyond her hiding spot, there was a series of columns and steps down to a lowered area in the centre of the room, which then ascended to a platform on the other side. From here, she could hear the creaking bones and taught bowstrings of at least two skeletal archers. They barely made a sound as they waited, and she realised she could not make it through this room without a fight.

Karme charged up a fireball in her hand, waiting until she couldn't hold it any longer. She spun round the corner, firing it at

the skeletons, before twisting back into hiding. There was a loud *bang* and the clatter of bones hitting the floor. She waited a few moments, hearing nothing more, and concluded that that the three she had seen must be felled. She stepped out and an arrow skimmed past her hair. She dived forward instinctively and shot another fireball in the direction it had come, blasting the final skeleton apart. She dusted herself off, made sure there weren't any more enemies in hiding, and made her way across to the other side.

She considered taking a bow and arrow from one of the skeletons—they weren't reforming any time soon, it seemed—but decided against it. She had only tried archery once as a child, and decided she was far too clumsy and inaccurate to pursue it. She'd be more likely to hurt herself than anything else with it.

She approached the door, this one surrounded by engravings of runes that she recognised from her childhood lessons in alchemy. It was the symbol for venom. Going by the analogy of the place so far, that meant she was getting closer, she reasoned. And doubtlessly, the Venom of the Serpent would be the most dangerous part.

Her hand was on the handle of the door, ready to push, when she heard a noise behind her. Footsteps. She froze, pushing herself against the wall and twisting the ring. But it hadn't recharged yet. Whatever it was, it was fast approaching. Had the skeleton from the first room come for her? What if there was more than one?

Sweat dripped down into her eyes. She had expended a lot of energy with those spells, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out. The steps were getting nearer, moving with an almost frantic pace. She started charging a fireball, readied herself to jump out...

"Karme!"

She almost fell over backwards. It was Nusha, whispering at her, holding her shoulders. With difficulty, she retracted the spell, and fell into Nusha's arms.

"You scared me."

“Shh. Something might hear us.”

“Is the other Argonian...?”

“He’s alive, but incapacitated. We should keep moving on, though.”

Karme pulled herself together, stood up, wiped her brow.

“I think we’re nearly there.”

What ‘there’ meant, she wasn’t sure. She still didn’t know if they would come face-to-face with the reanimated corpse of the Akaviri general, or would find a pile of worthless bones.

Nusha stepped forward and opened the door.