

The Stuff of Nightmares



The Narova Stories: Book I

By: Fargoth
ShortFantasy.com

Table of Contents

Beginner's Luck.....1

The Second Kill.....5

The Poison Sale.....10

A Lesson in Alteration.....13

Chapter 1: Beginner's Luck

Of course Nazir gives me a bullshit assignment on my first contract. Doesn't think a woman can handle herself, eh? I'll show him. I'll show them all. Astrid and the rest. They may have given me the armor—that supple black leather that fits my elf-skin like a glove—but I am not one of them yet.

Soon I will earn my place among them. With blood.

I walk over snow in the night. There should be a crunching noise, I know. There used to be. But the assassin's boots I wear hide that somehow. I am as silent as the white flakes that fall on my shoulders, mingling with my black hair in a way I find oddly erotic. Can't say why. Maybe the white mixed with black reminds me of that Redguard warrior I had a fortnight ago. He was a decent enough lover, but dumber than a skeever.

Nazir sent me to kill some beggar who lives in Ivarstead. It was a six day ride from the sanctuary in the Pine Forest. I'm sure that's part of my initiation as well—head out to the middle of fucking nowhere just to kill a flea ridden beggar who probably doesn't even have the strength to get a hard-on.

Wonderful.

My plan was to ride out in broad daylight and do him where everyone could see. Send a message: This sexy assassin isn't afraid of anyone or anything. If you're on her list, you're as good as dead.

Thing was, the guards here remember me, even with the new getup, for a little scrape I got into last spring. I fucked a fat merchant staying at the inn and slit his throat right before he could spew his vile seed inside me. It was disgusting, but the bastard had almost three thousand Septims on him.

Hey, a girl's got to eat.

Anyway, let's just say our "lovmaking" attracted some attention, and I had to leave this shithole town in a hurry. Haven't been back in The Rift since.

One of the guards must have had a memory like a mage, because he spotted me right off and started shouting like big Nord idiot.

"You're Narova Black Hair! You're under arrest!"

Seriously, could their accents sound any dumber?

Three of his Nord fuck-buddies were on me before I could so much as notch an arrow on my bow. I wasn't about to take on four guards all by my lonesome, so I hightailed out of there and lost them in the wilderness. Looped around the far side of town after dark.

Bringing me here, crouched down behind a rock outcropping and watching the pathetic beggar pacing around his burnt-out shack of a home. I can take him from where I am with an arrow, but that'd be too easy. Sets a cowardly precedent for my long and furtive career as a merciless killer, too.

So I leave my bow and arrows in the snow, unsheathe the ebony dagger I stole from a drunken Imperial soldier in Anvil, and start picking my way down the cliff face.

I stay low and small, wound up into a little black ball of death even Daedric prince wouldn't see coming. Hop, hop, hop. The only sound is the light sigh of leather as my legs flex and unflex from the descent.

In half a minute I am on the ground, fifty feet from the beggar, who has his back to me and appears to be fully invested in dislodging the contents of his left ear.

Step, step, step. There is no snow on this ground, just wet mud. I move forward silently until I'm so close to the flea bag I can hear the sound of his finger digging out earwax.

I widen my stance and flex the fingers on my left hand.

Grab his mouth, slit his throat, I say to myself.

And then there's a voice from across the river.

"What is that? Who's there with you...NARFI LOOK OUT!"

Narfi-the-flea-ridden-fuck turns around, finger still in his ear. A stupid look in his eyes.

My clean kill is blown, but I'm not about to bungle the job any more than I already have, so I rear back and slam my dagger into the beggar's ear, punching through that greasy finger and deep into his brain. He's dead before his body hits the ground.

"Pick that out, why don't you," I say.

That blade is the most valuable thing I own, but it's buried hilt-deep in the shit-pile's skull and I don't see it coming out very easy.

Plus, it'll send a message. Not the one I'd planned on sending, but a message nonetheless.

“Guard! Guards! Somebody do something!” That same voice yells. I make a note of that sound in my head, because I’m coming back to kill that loud-mouth at a more convenient time.

I crouch down and head north along the water, losing myself in the shadows of the trees. There is a clatter nearby and I look across the river where a guard is already notching a second arrow on his bow. Two men are running up from behind him with swords drawn, heading for the bridge.

Not good.

I forget the sneaking and bound for cover behind an outcropping.

Leap, leap, pain. Pain you wouldn’t believe.

An arrow gets me in the thigh, digging into the meat of my leg like a bolt of lightning. I don’t scream. I don’t make a damned noise. I collapse behind the rocks and catch my breath.

“She’s over there!” The guard who shot me yells. “Come around both sides, she’s trapped.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, nice and soft. A gentle whisper to myself. That’s all the time I give myself to panic.

Then I grab a handful of cold mud from the ground and press it over the arrow to stop the blood from dripping, pack it nice and tight.

I don’t want to use the invisibility potion, but there’s no other way. I pull it out of a pocket on my belt and gulp it down in two swallows.

Tastes like a mammoth’s asshole mixed with Falmer spunk.

The potion sits heavy in my belly for a moment and then spreads through my blood in a matter of seconds. And I’m invisible.

I hobble towards the rocks ahead, going as fast I can. Pull myself up on the boulders and move.

Climb, climb, climb.

“She’s not here. Where’d she go?!” I hear a guard yell, but I don’t look back, I keep climbing and counting.

Only thirty more seconds, got to keep going.

“Look around, look for blood. I definitely hit her. She can’t have gone far.” The bowman says in a world that’s so far behind me it might as well be a fairyland.

“...no blood...think you might have missed her.”

Ten more seconds. I pull myself up over one last cliff and roll towards a dark shadow in the cliff face.

And what do you know? That dark shadow turns out to be the mouth of a cave.

I roll down the short tunnel just as I feel the unapologetic weight of visibility return to my skin. For ten minutes I don’t move a muscle, just let my heartbeat return to normal and my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Listen for the sound of guards.

I don’t hear anything, but I can see the contents of the cave now.

A bedroll, a moldy piece of bread, and four bottles of Blackbriar mead. All of them are full.

I smile and uncork one, take a huge swig of the delicious liquid to shush the burning pain growing in my thigh. It’ll be an unpleasant night of digging out the arrow, but I’ll survive. And I’ve got a healthy supply of booze to help me along. Things could have gone better, but they could have gone a lot worse, too.

Call it beginner’s luck.

Chapter 2: The Second Kill

I spent two weeks recovering from the arrow wound I earned on my first assignment. That was a fuck-up if I've ever had one.

The arrow didn't hit anything except the meat, but it was one of those barbed, Orcish types that chews through whatever it can get its hands on. And its hands got on an awful big chunk of my leg.

I spent three days holed up in a cave outside Ivarstead and then hobbled my way back to the sanctuary. Only the gods know where my horse ended up.

The others had already heard what happened. They told me I'd done well, that it was a decent kill for a newbie, but I could hear the snickering echoing off the stone walls before I was halfway to my bunk.

The werewolf was the only one who didn't make fun of me. I wouldn't have missed that animal growl mixing in with the rest of their scorn. He even came to me later and helped me with the arrow wound.

He's a pretty one, that werewolf. And I do believe Astrid noticed the extra attention her lupine hubby paid me while I was laid up in bed.

Probably why she gave me such a bullshit second assignment.

Muri—what a pussy.

I've fucked my share of shitty men. Most of the time, I did it so I could rob them or murder them afterwards, but once or twice it was me who came up on the short side of things. You can't make a fuss about it. That's how they win.

I'd have thought finding out her cock-supply was actually a bandit would have spiced up her otherwise completely uninteresting life. Seriously, the most exciting thing this girl's ever done is make a hard-on potion, and when she finds out her lover's a seriously successful thief and murderer, she immediately has him killed?

I'd have joined him. And when the time came, I'd have killed him myself and taken his place. That's the way to do things. You don't go whining to the Dark Brotherhood because your heart got broken. You deal with it yourself.

Like I said, such a pussy.

But a job's a job, and I need to make up for the last time. Astrid and the others will never respect me otherwise. Never fear me.

And if they don't fear me, I'll never survive my turn on this crummy world.

I was on the road for eleven days all together. Four days to Markarth where I got the details from Muiri, and then six days and a night to get to Alain Dufont's hideout. Holed up in some Dwarven ruin called Raldbthar on a mountainside southwest of Windhelm.

I lost a lot of respect for Alain when I got a look at his outfit—undisciplined, drunk skeever-fuckers who smelled almost as bad as they sounded. Farting and burping every three seconds by the fire they kept outside Raldbthar.

It would have been nothing to choose a good shadow to hide beneath—pull a few arrows from my quiver and pick them off one by one. They'd have been dead before the last one had time to draw his sword. But that wouldn't have won me any respect. The others would have said I botched my first close-quarters kill and was afraid to try again.

I had to be perfect this time. Invisible, until the opportune moment.

So I left my bow in the snow, just like last time, and started picking my way up the side of the mountain.

It felt good to be moving in my leather again instead of straddling a horse. I was a black cat stalking through the night. None of the morons saw me. They couldn't even begin to fathom me—the silent fury I carried on my shoulders.

I came up above the entrance and dropped down. Cracked the door just enough to let myself in. As I closed it softly, I heard the rumble of another idiot's fart and the laughter of his friends.

They won't be laughing come morning, I thought, when they see what I've done to their leader.

The inner hall was mostly deserted. Just one sleeping guard who I didn't even bother to tiptoe past. He smelled like the inside of a meadery, so I didn't figure him for much of an alarm.

The pathways split—a long hallway to my left and a wall of flame to my right.

I went right, leapt over the flame and did a quick roll to silence my fall on the other side. The tunnel ended at a tall, heavy gate.

And on the other side I heard voices.

“Why bother with another score so soon?” one voice said. I could tell by the deep, guttural rasp that he was an Orc. “We’ve got mead and food aplenty for a month at least. Let’s just stay here and enjoy ourselves. Get some women to keep us company.”

“Because Winterhold is ripe for the taking,” another voice responded. Alain, I figured by the superior tone he took with the Orc. “And if we pull this job off, we’ll be free and clear for a year at least.”

“That’s what you said about the last job,” the Orc responded.

They kept talking. I snuck my up to the big gate. It was a complicated lock, but I’d learned the tune of the tumbler song a long time ago. I took a lockpick out of my belt and went to work, digging slowly and methodically at the rusty door.

Twenty seconds later, I had it open.

I only pushed the gate open as far as I needed to slip through, and then closed it again. There were four men on the other side, sharing the warmth of a fire with a skewer of meat across the top. All of them had their backs to me.

Perfect.

I drew my steel dagger (a downgrade from the ebony blade I used to carry, sure, but what can you do?). Then I moved forward, sticking to the flickering of shadows the firelight afforded me.

Just breathe. I told myself. *Breathe and visualize.*

I came up behind the closest bandit—a short, stocky human—so that the rest of them wouldn’t see me. I watched their eyes as I approached, searching for signs of recognition.

I was two feet from the human before I saw the Orc’s eyes turn into little discs of white. I was just a black whisper in his vision, but a whisper that did not belong.

I lunged forward and plunged my blade into the human’s neck, severing every artery he had.

The blood gushed out of his wound like a geyser, splattering the Imperial next to him blind. I shoved the dying man into the soon-to-be-dead Imperial and moved towards the Orc across from me. I learned a long time ago to always kill the Orc as soon as possible. They’re a fearsome breed, those Greenskins.

He had his sword halfway out of its sheath before I rammed my blade up underneath his chin, sticking it up into his brain. His body went slack and his eyes got all googly.

Then I heard the whisper of something massive swinging through the air behind me.

I ducked, and the warhammer dug into the already-dead Orc with a wet crunch. Nearly cleaved him in two. It was Alain, but I wasn't ready to finish him just yet. The Imperial was still clawing at his face, trying to get some sight out of his blood-stained eyes. My dagger was still buried in the Orc's skull, so I pulled free the ebony dagger the Imperial had on his hip and slit his throat with it.

Look at that, I thought as his red smile cracked open before me. *I've got my old baby back.*

Alain took another swing at me with that magic hammer, but I ducked and rolled out of the way. Then faced him. Blade up and ready.

"Who are you?" he growled. For a Breton, he was actually pretty handsome. I could see how Muiri got swept off her feet. He was all dark skin and bright eyes. I figured women had always come easy for him.

"I am the black bird that comes knocking in the night," I said. Circling around to his weak side, stepping lightly over the bodies of his comrades.

"The Brotherhood?" he asked. A hint of panic in his voice.

"It's your doom," I said. "Call it whatever you like."

I saw the resignation in his face, then. The acceptance of what came next. It was in that moment that I knew I was going to love this job.

None of the people I'd killed before him had seen me for the harbinger of death that I was starting to become.

"Well," Alain said. "Let's see what you've got."

He lunged at me with a downward swing of his hammer. A good thought, given his range advantage, but he didn't account for my speed.

I waited until he was sure he had me—I could see the victory in his eyes—and then I dodged left.

His hammer pounded into the cobbled floor with a metallic echo and bounced away. I moved around behind him and jabbed the ebony blade into the back of his neck—right between two of his vertebrae and through to the other side.

He was dead before his body hit the ground.

"Poor Alain," I whispered. "You fucked the wrong alchemist."

I pulled my new blade out of his neck and wiped each side clean on his hide armor.
Sheathed the dark metal on my hip.

Now I'm off to kill Alain's lover, Nilsine Shatter-Shield, in Windhelm. After that it's back to Markarth for my reward.

When word of what I've done reaches the sanctuary, they'll finally start to fear the name Narova Black Hair.

I know it.

Chapter 3: The Poison Sale

I knew when I took the Weeping Willow out from behind the counter and placed it in front of the black-haired Bosmer that she had a dubious purpose in mind.

I can almost always tell what a customer's intent is by the look in their eyes when they finally see what their money has bought them. Hope, freedom, love, anguish (sometimes those last two go together), fame, riches, revenge, and murder.

The desire to end a life is the clearest change—as obvious as a dragon's long shadow descending upon a city that was bathed in sunlight seconds earlier.

Of course, an amateur alchemist can easily judge a potion's purpose. Poisons for death. Charms for love. Etcetera.

But I am no amateur. My creations are far more elegant than some crude, aimless walk down the narrow trail of cause and effect.

The only chains that bind me are the deceptively flexible limits of possibility we are afforded in this crummy plane of reality.

I can brew a tonic that will temporarily convince a man he is a woman. (I can also make one that will quite permanently make this transfer a reality, but the ingredients and effort are so costly I almost never have the occasion to brew it.)

One of my tinctures alters a man's taste buds so that everything he eats tastes like chocolate. Or sweet rolls. Or mammoth shit.

I used to make a flying potion but it killed nearly all of the customers who purchased it because there is no such thing as a landing potion.

And, of course, there are the more predatory concoctions. I can make a man's stomach implode upon itself. Turn his cock black and brittle so that it falls off if he shakes it too hard after a piss. Or melt his guts down to jelly so that he craps them out while begging for a faster death.

One of my favorite creations opens a plane to Oblivion inside the drinkers head and then closes it again, but takes the brain with it. It always brings a smile to my lips to think that somewhere out in that dark world, this is a mountain of humanoid brains all stacked up like a rock pile.

Incidentally, that's how Titus Mede I died.

With all of these possibilities just a few ingredients away, how I am to say what my creations will truly be used for?

This Bosmer made for an intriguing customer. Long black hair and dark eyes that gave up nothing and seemed to end nowhere. She wore the armor of the Dark Brotherhood, but I knew she hadn't been with them long. I know all of their members. Astrid is one of my best customers.

"You're familiar with all of the effects?" I asked.

"Have they changed since five minutes ago, when you recited them to me?" She responded. Smartass.

"No," I reached for a soft cloth to wrap the bottle in. "I just like to hear it one final time, before I relinquish possession of my creation. Puts me at ease."

"You don't seem like you have much trouble staying calm," she observed.

For a few moments, there was silence while she tried to swallow me up with those endless, beautiful eyes.

"Three thousand Septims," I said after a while.

She blinked once and then ran a hand slowly down her hip and drummed it lightly against her leather armor. There was no denying that she had an impressive figure, but her charms were wasted on me. I burned out the last of my lust for flesh long ago. No easy feat.

"Perhaps there's another way to settle it," she suggested, flicking her eyes to the stairs that led to my sleeping quarters.

"There isn't." I said. Beneath the table I pulled the stopper off a poison that would turn this beautiful harbinger of death into a bubbling pile of meat.

Can't be too careful.

She seemed to weigh this. The costs and benefits of trying to kill me. I had no real desire to end her life—something told me it would be an interesting one.

"I do offer a discount to repeat customers, however," I said, just as I saw her hand start to crawl from hip to scabbard.

"How much of a discount?" she asked.

"For you?" I shrugged. "Fifty percent. So long as you keep putting in orders as interesting as this one."

Her hand stopped, and then drifted back to her hip.

“What’s your name, alchemist?”

“Morlanus.”

“Funny name for a human,” she said, pulling out a large purse of gold and flopping it onto the table.

“I’m a funny person,” I said. Of course, I’m not actually a human. Potions of racial malleability are something of a specialty for me.

I counted the gold and then pushed the cloth-wrapped bottle towards her.

“And your name?” I asked as she carefully stowed the Weeping Willow into a pouch at the small of her back.

She smiled. “When you hear what’s been done with this poison, I expect you’ll be hearing my name attached quite securely to the event.” She turned and opened the door. The crisp night air filled the room. “See you soon, Morlanus.”

Then she was gone.

I thought about brewing a potion of prophecy, but there was no need. I knew that I would see her again.

Chapter 4: A Lesson in Alteration

The others had been holding out on me.

I knew that they hadn't respected me—taken me for some upjumped thief and whore who'd be dead in a moon's turn—but I could never have imagined the power they'd been keeping to themselves.

Not until they started to share it with me.

Alain Dufont's assassination finally got them to take me seriously. Word trickled back to the sanctuary before I did of the death I'd wrought on his mountain hideout. His band of thieves and murderers were running scared, and telling tales of a black-haired killer on their trail.

But it was Nilsine Shatter-Shields's death that put them over the edge—really convinced Astrid and the others that I was one of them. I snuck into Windhelm under cover of darkness and decapitated that bitch in her bed. Left her head on a spike in front of the Candlehearth Hall for everyone to see come morning.

"You reek of blood," Nazir said when I returned seven days later (I had taken a detour to see a certain alchemist about a little side project of mine).

The rest passed out congratulations as well. All of them agreed that it was a beautiful piece of killing. Veezara even asked me how I'd managed to sneak into Windhelm without being seen—it being such an old, impregnable city.

That trick I kept to myself. Girl has to have her secrets.

But it was Arnbjorn's words that sealed the deal. He came to me again after the others had gone back to their duties. I could smell his wild animal odor behind me, see his big shadow in the candlelight of my small chamber.

"How's the leg?" he asked. I turned around and drank him in with my eyes.

"A little stiff," I admitted. "But better every day."

He nodded gravely. "I had been worried it wasn't quite healed."

"Aw, you were thinking about me?" I knew this was a dangerous road. I just didn't care.

He considered me. Looking me up and down with those blue eyes.

“You’re one of us now,” he said. “A true member of the Brotherhood.”

I smiled. The first smile in months that wasn’t a painted mask of deceit. It felt good.

“I’m happy,” I said softly.

He fidgeted a bit in the doorway, then spoke. “I brought this for you,” he said, showing me a book he’d been holding behind his back.

“A bedtime story?”

“A spellbook. A valuable one. You won’t be able to use it yet, but I told Festus Krex that it was time for him to take you under his wing. Get some rest. He’ll be waiting for you in the morning.”

He crossed the room and handed me the book. I took it from him and looked at the cover.

Extended invisibility.

“Arnbjorn...” I started to say.

“I’ve had it for a long time,” he interrupted quickly, already moving towards the door. “I’m not much for spells myself. The hammer is all I’ve ever needed.” He smiled—kindness looked strange on such a rough man. “But you. I am thinking your blood has been calling for the dark arts for quite some time. It’s time for you to answer.”

The next morning, my new life began.

I met Festus Krex at dawn in the common room, the alchemy laboratory was already bubbling with one of his concoctions.

“Tell me, Narova,” he asked without turning around. “What do you know of Illusion?”

“I know it can be tricky to put your finger on.”

“Funny. And Alteration?”

I shrugged. “Never could see the point in it. Can’t kill anyone with a magic flashlight.”

“Hmmm. An interesting perspective.”

Then he disappeared.

I scanned the room. Turned around. Then turned around again. The room reeked of burning hair, but Festus was gone. Then I felt an icy jolt spreading down my spine, and I froze up stiffer than a cedar tree.

Hit the ground like one, too.

It felt like my veins had filled with ice. Nothing worked. Festus flipped me over like a log for the fire and smiled at me.

“Do you think something like that might prove useful given our vocation?”

I tried to nod, but nothing happened. Then Festus said a few words and I felt movement burning back into my body like a tall glass of Cyrodiil brandy. I struggled to my feet.

“Teach me that,” I said, gasping for air.

“You’re not ready,” he said quickly. “Not by a long shot. I just wanted to avoid wasted time on that smart mouth of yours when we spent the rest of the day practicing your mage light and your muffle.”

“The rest of the day?” I asked.

He smiled again, wider this time. “Oh yes. And all night. Narova Black Hair, you are officially my new apprentice. And I am going to teach you to become the stuff of nightmares.”

“Yes,” I said. “Good.”