

The Broken Oar Grotto Massacre



The Narova Stories: Book II

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Chapter 1: An Odd Request

“This is unusual,” Astrid said.

She was seated behind a stone table in the Falkreath Sanctuary. Both arms resting lazily on the large stone chair. Legs crossed and spread out before her. The Blade of Woe strapped to her hip was in plain sight.

To her left stood Arnbjorn—a six and half foot tall Nord who betrayed the truth of his animal blood with every breath he drew.

And on the right was Narova Black Hair. A slim, lithe wood-elf who glared at the two smugglers in front of her with dark, pitiless eyes. She was the newest member of the Dark Brotherhood, and quickly earning a reputation for herself.

But Gonja didn’t know any of them. He looked across the room and only saw black, leather armor and malice. Maybe his death, too. He wasn’t sure.

“Aye,” Gonja said. “You see, it’s not every day a ship hauls a cargo like that. Those chests of Moon Sugar must be worth twenty-thousand gold a piece. It’s a fortune! I know the Brotherhood don’t generally take a contract with money that don’t exist yet, but—”

“It is not the method of payment that I find unusual,” Astrid interrupted. Her voice cut through Gonja’s slimy Breton accent like a spear impaling a mudcrab. “It’s the fact that you are proposing the job from inside this Sanctuary. Not performing the Black Sacrament somewhere else and waiting for us to answer your call at our leisure.”

Gonja fidgeted a little. “As to that, Korlan said he knew you. Knew the words at the door. That’s how we came to be here.” He motioned to his companion. A hulking Nord—pale and massive. Far larger than Arnbjorn. The entire right side of his face was black from some recent and ruinous injury.

“Figured it’d be...more direct, I guess,” Gonja finished.

Astrid’s eyes darted over to Korlan. He met her gaze without flinching or retreating to a view of his own feet like most people did when Astrid looked upon them.

“Why have you returned?” she asked.

Korlan glanced at Gonja—who's mouth was now hanging open at this new revelation—and then turned back to Astrid.

"I said there'd come a time." His wounded jaw was still bothering him, and the words clearly caused a measure of pain.

"You said you'd return for vengeance and blood."

"Never said it'd be yours."

Arnbjorn laughed at that. Everyone seemed to relax a bit as his gruff amusement echoed off the stone walls.

"Never took you for the prophetic type, you pale hunk of meat," Arnbjorn said.

Korlan shrugged. "Never took you for the married type."

Now they both laughed, although Korlan quickly stifled his merriment because of the pain it caused.

"If you two are done trying to fuck each other," Narova interrupted, "why don't we get down to business?"

"Mmm, ever the eager one, eh Narova?" Astrid asked. She leaned forward in her chair and made a steeple with both of her hands. "I know the gang that attacked you, and I know the black-skinned Argonian that leads them. His name is Jaree-Ra. Where he lays his head these days, I do not know. But it's a safe bet that he stays near that cove. Plenty of ship wrecks to keep his wallet fat."

She paused and rearranged herself in the chair.

"I could send these two," she motioned to Arnbjorn and Narova, "to kill Jaree-Ra and his gang. Just two would be risky, though. Jaree-Ra's gang is quite large."

"We're willing to fight," Gonja said quickly. "I'm not so bad with a sword, but Korlan..." he trailed off. Then continued softly. "I guess you know better than me what he can do."

"Four is enough for the job," Astrid agreed. "But I could also kill both of *you* right now, and send two more of my own in your place. Take the entirety of this Moon Sugar surplus you speak of and use it for the Brotherhood. Turn us into a true Guild again. Maybe carve some new sanctuary out of the side of a mountain."

She let that sink in for a few moments.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't do that."

Gonja started to speak and then stopped. Fumbled around for words but didn't find them

"Honor," Korlan said.

"You came to the wrong place for that," Astrid replied softly.

The big Nord fixed his eyes on her hard. Gonja and Arnbjorn seemed like they both thought it would come to violence, and they got ready. But not Narova.

She knew the meaning of that look, even if she didn't know the name for it.

"No I didn't," Korlan said.

Astrid fiddled with the hilt of her dagger with one hand and drummed a finger on the stone table with the other.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Get some rest," she said at last. "The four of you leave at dawn."

Chapter 2: A Dark Brotherhood Bath

“You take longer baths than Elisif the Fair,” Arnbjorn said from the doorway.

Narova opened her eyes and turned her head. The bath room was deep underground in the Sanctuary. The chilly cave air made it so steam billowed off the surface of the hot water in a white, ethereal blanket.

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning,” Narova said, pulling both arms out of the water and stretching them over her head. “Might be the last proper bath I have in weeks.”

“That’s true, Arnbjorn said carefully. “But you’ve been taking epic baths for the last month.”

Narova paused. Let the steam ebb and flow around her view of the large Nord. He never wore gloves or shoes. Narova liked that about him. She imagined he did it to feel closer to the earth. The loamy soil. The wet rivers.

“Festus says it’s important. That it purifies the body after a day of running magic through my muscles and veins.” She examined her arm for a moment and then looked at Arnbjorn playfully. “It’s working wonders on my skin, at least. So much softer than it used to be.”

Arnbjorn frowned. “The magic’s what I came to talk to you about. Festus said you’re improving. Picked up Alteration faster than anyone he’s ever seen, he told me.”

“Call it a knack for getting my way,” Narova said. Arnbjorn shifted uncomfortably in the doorway. Narova smiled. “You and your doorways. Always lingering like some lost puppy. A werewolf should at least have the courage to come a little closer.” Narova swished the surface of the water around with her finger.

“I won’t bite,” she said. “Promise.”

Arnbjorn hesitated and then stepped lightly into the room. Narova had never seen him fight, but she could tell that he was good at it by the way that he walked. She could see the potential for violence in each footstep. He carried himself loose, but he never fully relaxed. Always ready for whatever was coming next.

This time, Narova thought it might be her.

“Festus said that you’ve mastered telekinesis and water breathing. That’s good. Most likely the Blackbloods will have set up near the sea.”

“Breathing isn’t the only thing I can do with water,” Narova said.

Narova glanced at the door, let her mind wrap around the metal handle, and pushed it shut with her mind.

Arnbjorn looked at the closed door, and then back at her.

Narova took a deep breath, and then put her palms on the surface of the bath water and gently spread them to either side. The water split in two and was pulled to either side along with her palms, as if she held the steaming liquid by some invisible chain.

She saw Arnbjorn’s eyes open a little wider at the sight of her naked, steaming body. All lithe and relaxed in the pinewood basin. His animal scent filled the room, stronger than before.

He liked what he saw.

Her nipples hardened almost immediately under the cold air. An errant droplet of water dripped down her belly and into the soft tuft of hair between her legs. Every so slightly, she spread her legs, giving Arnbjorn an ephemeral view of the treasure she kept there.

Then she let her focus drop, and the water splashed back into place with a smack.

Narova looked into Arnbjorn’s ice-blue eyes, smiling and waiting. He cleared his throat.

“And paralysis,” he said. “How are you coming with paralysis?”

Narova’s smile faded. *Not ready just yet, eh wolf?* That’s all right, his scent didn’t lie. He wanted her in a way he could barely control. She could practically hear his blood pumping heavy through his heart with desire. The Sanctuary wasn’t the place, though. Soon they’d be out in the wild.

Soon they would be free.

“That one isn’t so simple,” Narova admitted, letting herself sink down so the water reached the tip of her elf-chin. “I’ve been practicing on Babel’s wretched spider. Sometimes I can freeze it up stiffer than a dead Argonian. Other times, it shakes out of it like it’s escaping from its own web. Other times...it doesn’t work at all.”

Narova frowned, frustrated by the thought of her failures.

Arnbjorn saw this. “Well, I wouldn’t worry too much. Way I hear it you never miss with that bow of yours. And I’m not half bad with the hammer.”

He smiled. That crooked, devious, and beautiful smile. “We’ll likely survive.”

Arnbjorn walked towards the door, but stopped before opening.

“I’m looking forward to killing alongside you. It’s what I do best.”

Narova drank him in one more time.

“Me too.”

Chapter 3: On the Road to Solitude

Narova Black Hair leaned back in her saddle. Tired.

They'd been riding for three days. Ambling their horses along the road leading north from Falkreath.

Earlier that morning, they'd crossed onto the great open plain west of Whiterun. Nothing but small trees, a few streams, and the endless green shimmering of the grasses moving in the wind.

Narova didn't like it. They were too exposed and vulnerable. She kept her eyes on the horizon, searching for small black dots of leather or steel armor rising over a hill. Bandits liked the plain, with its hidden caves and small shelters.

Good places to hide after a score out of Whiterun or Rorikstead.

Gonja and Korman rode ahead a ways. The two sea-smugglers weren't used to horses, so Narova had wanted them in front of her where she could see them. Never knew when one of those buffoons would take a tumble and crack his skull open.

Plus, Gonja never shut up. Distance was the only thing that could silence that man.

Arnbjorn rode beside her on a black destrier, casting a massive shadow across her smaller courser. Narova didn't mind—she liked the cool respite from the sun.

"You look nervous," he said to her.

"Cautious, more like. I do not like being so exposed."

Arnbjorn shrugged. "If anyone's got cause to be nervous, it's me. I didn't leave the Companions on the best of terms. The Jarl of Whiterun and I had our disagreements as well."

"Tall bounty?" Narova asked.

"A bounty is one way to put it." Arnbjorn shook his head. "A burning need to see my limbs torn off and my head on a spike is another."

Narova laughed. "Yeah, I've got a handful of spots in Tamriel like that. Don't think I'll ever see the white walls of Anvil again. Not unless it's the last thing I want to see."

They rode in silence for a little while.

“What did you do?” Narova asked eventually. “I mean, why’d you leave the Companions?”

Arnbjorn glanced over at her, and then turned back to the road. Squinted his eyes a little. “The Companions are brave warriors. Strong. And the Blessing of Hircine made them even stronger.”

“The Blood of the Wolf?” Narova asked. She had heard rumors that some of the Companions passed lycanthropy down to each other.

“That’s right. I was changed by Aela the Huntress. The first time was like…” he trailed off for a moment. “It was like the world had been draped in a black sheet my entire life. And someone finally pulled it off. Everything was sharper, clearer. Burning, even. That never goes away. Even after you change back, you’re never the same. People always think of Hircine’s Blessing as the wolf’s body—all fur and claws and howls. But that’s not what it is.”

“No?”

“It’s the simplicity. The lack of fear or doubt or guilt. The feral instinct is stronger than all that human shit. But the Companions are afraid. Timid. They never embraced the wolf. It’s just a tool to them.”

“What is it to you?”

He let go of the reigns and spread his hands out wide. “It’s me. Down to the marrow.”

“You haven’t answered my question, though,” Narova pointed out. “Why’d you split from the pack and become a big bad assassin?”

Arnbjorn shrugged casually. “I killed for fun. Ate the Jarl’s daughter and shat her back out on that prickly bastard’s throne.”

Narova looked over at him, searching for remorse or guilt and not finding any. She liked that. The honesty of his brutality made her fingers tingle.

They were the same, she and him.

“I went feral for a while,” Arnbjorn continued. “Living off the land. Naked and wild…but alone, too. Eventually, I threw in with Astrid and the others.” He paused. “Every wolf needs a pack.”

“Fair enough,” Narova said. Figuring it was best to leave it at that.

They road up over a small hill, catching a strong gust of wind in their faces. Twisting all the smells of the plain up in a bundle. Gonja and Korman's heads were just disappearing down into a small ravine ahead.

"What about you, elf. What's your story?"

Narova smiled. "It's long and dark and full of sex. You wouldn't like it."

"Sounds like I would. Anyway, that's not fair, I spilled mine."

"Yeah, but you've seen me naked. Call it a fair trade."

"At least tell me where you're from. How you got so good with that bow?"

Narova drifted back to the forests of Valenwood in her mind. The tropical rains and endless mangroves. The soft footfalls of the migratory trees at dawn. It seemed like someone else's life. Too long ago to still have been her walking along that forest floor.

"Not today," she said softly.

Arnbjorn looked like he was going to say something else, but just then they dipped down into the ravine, and saw that Gonja and Korman had stopped.

There were nine bandits in front of them. Mounted and spread out along the rocky ground. Four of them had bows drawn tight.

II.

"Perfect," Arnbjorn muttered.

"Think they can hit us from here?" Arnbjorn asked, pulling up on his reigns and patting his horse's neck gently to keep the beast calm.

Narova squinted out at the outlaws.

They were all in a line—all on horseback. The four men on each end had bows drawn, but they were simple, wooden things. Probably stolen from a group of hunters they killed. The bandit's drawbacks were clumsy and crooked and already starting to waver a little.

"Doubt it," Narova said. "Gonja and Korman are in a bit of trouble, though."

The two smugglers were fifty paces ahead. Gonja had turned around quickly to see where the two Dark Brotherhood assassins were, but that was it. Otherwise, they waited.

“If they get even with our two comrades, can you hit them then?” Arnbjorn asked quietly.

Narova smiled.

“Definitely.”

Most of the bandits were clad in mismatched pieces of leather or scale armor. Bits of iron and steel on a few of them. One of the Nords towards the middle of the line was wearing the chainmail shirt of a Whiterun Guard and carrying a shield with the yellow horse’s head on it.

Bandits who’d managed to kill a Hold guard liked to keep the armor as proof of the grisly deed. Nord soldiers did not give up their lives easily.

He smiled, and even from that long distance Narova shuddered at the sight of his yellow, broken teeth. Nasty.

The rider in the center of the line was taller by a head than the rest of them. Narova figured him to be the leader. He was clad from head to toe in ebony armor and carrying an Orcish greatsword in his left hand.

It looked like one hand was all he needed to swing that massive blade with plenty of fury.

He kicked his horse forward a few steps.

“Drop your weapons,” he growled from behind his helm. The voice sounded metallic and distant. “And get down from your horses. Might be you don’t die today.”

He sounded like an Orc, although it was hard to tell with the helm on. Everyone sounded the same behind that thick steel. The big bastard was the right size for it, at least.

Arnbjorn sniffed the air. Narova took her left hand off the reigns. Flexed it once and set it lightly on her thigh. Her bow was strapped to the side of the saddle, just a few inches away.

“You’re making a mistake, hamshank,” Arnbjorn called.

A deep, guttural laugh echoed out of the bandit’s helm. “The Brotherhood don’t scare me. A ragtag bunch of nightstabbers is all you are.” He raised his sword, pointing it at Arnbjorn’s chest. “Last chance.”

Arnbjorn just shrugged. “Hope you’re as good as they say you are, elf,” he said softly.

Narova took a deep breath. Felt the wind brushing against her face. Listened to the sound of the bandits' bowstrings straining under pressure. Let her breath out.

"Now!" Arnbjorn yelled, swinging his hand up to the handle of his warhammer and spurring his horse forward.

Narova pulled her bow free with her left hand at the same time she yanked two arrows out of her quiver. Notched them both.

She was lucky. The two archers on the right side were aiming for her and Arnbjorn. She wasn't worried about them. The two on the left were lined up on Gonja and Korman, but they flinched as Arnbjorn burst forward. Hesitated just a second.

That was all Narova needed.

Her two arrows shot through the air with a gentle whisper. Like the sound a hawk makes during a dive. Her first arrow caught one archer—an Argonian—in the shoulder, and he spun to his side and shot the man next to him in the neck. That one died before he hit the ground or got his sword halfway out of the sheath.

Her second arrow punched straight through the other archer's mouth, but not before he got a shot off at his target.

Gonja.

The smuggler yelped with pain and fell off his horse but Narova didn't see where he got hit—she was already notching a third arrow and turning to the other two archers. Their shots whisked harmlessly overhead as she drew back. Leveled her aim.

Fired.

Her shaft plunked one archer in the center of his chest. Knocked him off his horse and killed him.

The last Bowman was fumbling with a second arrow when he died. Straight shot through the throat.

Arnbjorn had burned down half the distance between the rest of the bandits. His animal howl filled the plain, making the wind sound like a child's bitching in comparison.

Three of the surviving bandits headed towards Arnbjorn—one of them with an arrow in his shoulder. The one with the Whiterun shield moved towards Korman, who had produced a three-headed flail from his saddle and begun swinging it wildly over his head.

The leader held his ground. Waiting. Watching.

Everyone was too close together for Narova to take more shots with her arrows. And they'd just slide off the ebony armor of the big one. Her dagger was no good from horseback, either.

Time to put those lessons with Festus to the test.

Narova vaulted off the back her saddle and landed silently on the soft earth. Placed both palms on the soil.

Focus. She told herself. *There is no reality. There is only you.*

Narova felt every hair on her body stand up. The slightest tingle in the tips of every finger and toe. And a warmth deep in her chest.

Then she disappeared.

The world was different when you were invisible. Wispy and thin. You were still there, but you were somewhere else, too—straddling two worlds without putting your full weight down on either side.

Narova moved forward on silent feet. Heading right at the leader. She saw his visor panning, searching for her. Wondering where the little elf had gone to.

Look harder, Orc. Narova thought.

She had only gone a few paces when Arnbjorn met the first of the three bandits. He was a Redguard with jet-black skin, an iron breastplate, and a curved scimitar that he was waving around wildly.

Arnbjorn's hammer surged into his chest with a sickening crunch. The Redguard was rocketed out of his saddle and thrown backward in a careening ball of broken metal that landed twenty feet behind the horse and tumbled five more into the shallow water.

Narova had never seen a man killed like that. Not by a human, anyway.

That's because he's not human. Not all the way, at least.

The other two yanked their horses to the sides when they saw their friend's swift demise, but the Argonian that Narova had shot couldn't quite get clear in time. Arnbjorn swung his hammer across his body and hooked the bandit across the neck, hard enough to break it and pull him off his horse.

Arnbjorn turned to face the one rider that escaped. As soon as his back was turned, the leader spurred his horse and headed towards Arnbjorn.

Clever bastard. But I have a few tricks of my own.

Narova quickened her pace, taking long, quick strides across the ground. Even at a full sprint she didn't make a sound.

The leader rode fast for such a big man. Cutting down the distance between himself and Arnbjorn in just a few short seconds. He came up on the left and pulled his blade back, prepared for a menacing arc of death.

Probably had enough strength to cut old Arnbjorn in half with that thing.

The bandit was just about to start bringing his sword forward when Narova leapt into the air—holding her dagger in a reverse grip. She'd need all the strength she had to punch through the mail beneath his armor.

She landed on the back of his saddle and pressed her left hand into the side his helm so his neck twisted and exposed a small space between his gorget and pauldron.

Gotcha.

Narova stabbed him three times, lighting fast. She felt herself rematerialized—no longer invisible—then she felt his body go slack and the sword drop from his hand. The horse veered off to the left as he leaned on the reins.

She was about to hop off the back of the horse and let the dead man ride off into the distance when something went wrong. His body didn't slack off the rest of the way. It tightened again. A new strength coming from nowhere.

Then he twisted around and pulled her off the horse.

They crashed to the ground in a clump of mud and leather and metal. Rolled over each other a few times, pushing all the air out of Narova's lungs. The bandit wound up on top. Narova felt her body sinking into the earth under the weight of his armor.

She raised her dagger and stabbed a few times, but couldn't find a space in the armor. Her blade glanced off his shoulder and chest harmlessly and then he clamped her hand down with a mailed fist.

There was blood leaking out of his neck. With his free hand he wrenched off the ebony helm.

Not an Orc. He was the biggest Khajjiit she'd ever seen. Massive. His face was battered and scarred and ruined.

"Close, elf," he hissed, blood coming out of his mouth. "But not enough."

He raised an enormous fist up in the air—so large it blotted the sun, casting that cool shade over her again. Narova relaxed her body and waited for the end. One blow was all it would take. Simple. The only thing that pissed her off was that she hadn't gotten to kill that bastard Sujava yet. Or have sex with Arnbjorn. Those would have been good things.

And then the enormous cat's head was gone. It was just neck and body and a wavering arm.

An impossibly high geyser of blood shot out from his neck. A deluge of hot, sticky blood poured down on Narova's face and body. Burned her eyes and filled her mouth. The cat-body withered and crumpled on top of her.

Gasping, she pushed it off and rolled away. Stood up and wiped her eyes as best she could.

Blood dripped from every part of Narova's body.

Arnbjorn was leaning against his hammer a few strides away, smiling.

"Now there's a pretty sight," he said.

Korman and Gonja were walking up to them. Korman's flail was deep red and covered with bits of brain and bone. Narova could see the remains of the bandit in the Whiterun armor behind him—nothing left but some meaty pulp and a few shards of the yellow shield scattered around.

That one's got some skills, too. Narova thought. *Got to keep an eye on him.*

Gonja had an arrow stuck through his right hand, and was grimacing from the pain. The only one who'd managed to contribute nothing to the situation.

Narova ran a bloody hand through her hair and picked her dagger out from beneath the cat's corpse. A large crater of blood was already forming. Narova wiped the blade clean in the grass and sheathed it.

"I already need a bath," she announced unhappily.

"Oh?" Gonja said, grinding his teeth. "Well I need someone to get this fucking arrow out my hand!"

Korman sighed. "I'll make a fire," he said.

Not a talker, that one.

Arnbjorn kicked the cat corpse once, as if to make sure it wouldn't spring up and give them one last bout of trouble.

"Biggest fucking Khajiit I ever saw," Narova said.

"Not a Khajiit," Korman said over his shoulder. "Ka Po' Tun."

As if that explained everything.

"On the bright side," Arnbjorn said. "We've got plenty of fresh horses to make Solitude."

Chapter 4: The Killings

“This is the spot,” Gonja said, fiddling with the bandage on his right hand. “North along the coast until you see a small entrance underneath a big cave-in. Just like Miranda told it.”

Arnbjorn frowned, and Narova could tell that he wasn't happy.

“How do you know the whore wasn't lying?” he asked.

They had sent Gonja into Solitude alone to find out where the Blackbloods made their camp. The loudmouth smuggler had been gone three days while they huddled beside a small fire in the damp rain, shivering and trying to decide how long to wait before going into the city and killing him for abandoning them.

Gonja had finally returned with a huge smile and information gleaned from a whore.

“For the last time,” Gonja said, rolling his eyes, “the Blackbloods took her and a few other girls up to the camp for a few nights. You know, to entertain the men. They blindfolded 'em, but Miranda's an Argonian and all, so she don't need no eyes to tell her where she is. Trust me, the dumb girl didn't have a devious bone in her body. She told it true.”

Narova twisted around in the small rowboat. “Tell me again, how is it you got so much information from an Argonian whore?”

Gonja flushed. “Well...uh, I don't see how that's important.” He turned back to the entrance of the grotto and pointed with his mangled hand. “*That's* important. That's what we've come for.”

Arnbjorn ran a hand through his silver beard and fingered the handle of his warhammer.

“All right. Korman, row us in. Nice and quiet.”

There was a fire going outside the grotto, but no guards. Just a few longboats and a tunnel leading into the earth. They pulled the boat ashore and hid it behind a small outcropping.

“So...not sure if you already noticed this, but I'm right-handed,” Gonja said, waving his bandaged hand through the air. “That is, I hold a sword with my right hand. I can jerk off

with the left in a pinch, but I don't think I'll be much good with the blade. Different motions entirely, one's all about the up and down—”

“Shut your fucking face,” Narova hissed. The smuggler was too damn loud. “You can mind the bloody boat. But if anyone comes in behind us, you'd better do something better than jerking your cock off on them.”

Silently for once, Gonja backed off to where the boat was hidden.

Ignoring them, Arnbjorn took a few steps forward on the gravel beach and sniffed the air coming from the cave.

“They're in there,” he said. “Close, too. Must be the guards ducked inside to get warm.”

Korman drew the silver scimitar he'd taken from the bandits who'd attacked them on the road to Solitude and headed for the entrance.

“Wait,” Arnbjorn said, and turned to Narova. “You're up, Black Hair. Nice and quiet.”

Narova nodded and drew her dagger.

Then she pulled the familiar curtain of invisibility over herself and stepped into the cave.

It was damp and cool and sounds of dripping water seemed to come from everywhere. The grotto extended back around a corner—much larger than Narova would have figured. A wooden scaffold was built into the wall, and there was a table and a few lamps set up. Stolen supplies and loot was stacked everywhere: animal skins, bottles of potions and alcohol, expensive armor.

And two Blackblood Marauders.

The closest one was sitting at table drinking a bottle of wine. The other was up some steps, sharpening a long, silver blade on a grindstone.

Narova stalked forward silently. She came up behind the first one, clamped a hand over his mouth, and drew her dagger smoothly across his throat. After he was dead, she tossed his corpse to the side so he tipped off his chair and landed with a clatter.

The grinding on the platform above stopped. Narova ducked into the shadow below the staircase.

“Marcus? Everything good?” The Blackblood asked.

Silence.

Narova heard him standing up. “Drunk bastard probably passed out again,” he muttered to himself.

The stairs sighed under the weight of his foot. One step. Two. Three.

The back of his ankle came into view. Narova swiped her blade across his boot, slicing his Achilles tendon in half. The Blackblood gasped and then tumbled down the rest of the stairs.

He was still moaning and trying to figure out what had happened to him when Narova cut his throat.

She came back out of the cave and motioned Arnbjorn and Korman forward.

They moved through the grotto quietly. There were a few guards milling around, but all of them were alone, so Narova took care of them with her arrows. Broken Oar went back for what seemed like miles—following the underground river deep into the side of the mountain.

A good hideout. Narova thought. *I’ll have to remember this place if I come around Solitude again.*

Eventually, they came to the end of it.

The Blackbloods had built a small fortress for themselves in the back of the grotto: Scaffolds and ramps and small cabins—all of it jerry-rigged from the remains of some old ship. They even had a smithy set up on a far wall.

Lots of weapons, too.

The three killers snuck forward on their bellies. Lining up on the far side of the big room where they could get a good look at everything. Narova counted thirty men, at least. Maybe more in the back. Hard to say.

“Do you see the Argonian?” Arnbjorn asked Korman, his voiced hushed.

Korman shook his head. “In one of the cabins, maybe.”

Arnbjorn nodded. “We’ll just have to go check.”

There was a small bridge over the water below them, but it was drawn up. On the far side there was a narrow shelf that led down into the camp—only wide enough for two men to pass through.

A perfect bottleneck.

Narova motioned to the shelf with her eyes and then pulled a fistful of arrows out of her quiver and jammed them into the ground. From here, she could see the entire length of the shelf. Arnbjorn followed her eyes and understood immediately. He tapped Korman on the back and they both stood up, stalked off along the shelf with their weapons drawn.

Narova notched an arrow and found her first target. An archer up near the top of the fortress picking at his fingernails and not paying attention.

Her arrow plunged into his bandit-heart at the same time Arnbjorn let out his piercing animal howl and charged along the shelf, smashing the skull of the lone guard they'd posted there. Korman was right behind him—flail in one hand and the silver scimitar in the other.

For bandits, they moved pretty quick. This lot really knew what they were doing—no panicking or wasted time trying to figure out what was going on. They all went straight for their weapons and then headed up to the shelf.

Narova aimed for the ones that seemed apt to cause the most trouble. She killed most of them with one arrow, winged others enough to slow them down at least. She never missed.

Five, six, seven, eight. She felt herself start to sweat and her arm started to tire from drawing her bow so fast.

The ones she didn't get met Arnbjorn and Korman along the shelf—coming at them two at a time. They were truly a sight to see, those two Nords. Korman whipped his flail around in a death-arc that simply obliterated anything it touched. One second there was a face, the next there was nothing except a mash of red meat. Chewed up and ruined and falling off the shelf into the water below.

Arnbjorn swung his hammer in big vertical arcs, smashing down on their shoulders and chests and heads. Leaving limp, crushed bodies in his wake.

But they kept coming. Streaming out of hidden rooms and covered cabins.

An entire fucking army.

Arnbjorn and Korman started pushing forward. Stepping over dead bodies until they were in a wider area and had more room to kill.

They needed help. Narova shot the last of her arrows, and without watching to see where it ended up, dropped her bow and dove into the water below.

Cold needles everywhere, and then she was pulling herself up on the other side and running up the series of ramps and planks that led to the bloodshed. She nearly bowled into a rushing Blackblood who was coming out of a small room—ducked his clumsy sword swing and then jammed her dagger hilt-deep in his face.

“Fucking kill them, it’s just two!” she heard a Blackblood shout from above.

Keep moving. She told herself.

They all had their backs to her when she reached the shelf. Twenty of them, at least. But that seemed to be all of them. Korman was swinging his flail still, but not quite as fast. Arnbjorn was backed into a corner and stabbing his hammer out in fast, lighting jabs. Pushing men back but not killing them.

Stalling for time.

Narova picked up a short sword from the ground. Adjusted the grip in her hand. Then she rushed forward.

She hit the first Blackblood so hard in the back of the neck that his head shot off and smacked into a man three feet ahead with enough force to knock him over. Stabbed the next one in the back of the knee and the kidney.

The rest was a whirlwind of blood and gore and screams. Beautiful carnage. The Blackbloods didn’t figure out what was happening until Narova had killed almost all of them. The last few turned around in time to get crushed by Arnbjorn’s hammer or Korman’s flail.

When it was over, Korman walked around the bodies, looking at their faces and then finishing the ones who still clung to little wisps of life. Narova let her breathing return to normal. Arnbjorn sat down on a rock.

“Not here.” Korman said after he’d check everyone.

“What?”

“The Black Argonian is not here.”

They were all silent for a moment. And then the grotto slowly filled with a distant swishing sound that grew louder and louder.

Oars in the water. Coming their way.

There were six boats. Five men in each one. The oars dug them forward through the gloom of the grotto.

Thirty more Blackbloods coming towards Korman, Arnbjorn, and Narova. There was no way they could take that many more. Not out in the open like this.

“We’re fucked,” Narova hissed.

Korman squinted out at the boats. The Marauders hadn’t seen them yet, but it wouldn’t be long. Plus, the forty-or-so corpses floating in the water would be a pretty big clue something was amiss.

“They have Gonja,” Korman said flatly. “I will handle this.”

Narova followed his gaze. He was right. The other smuggler was standing up at the front of one of the boats with the stiff, unnatural look of a man who had a knife pointed at his back.

Probably did try to jerk off on them. Narova thought.

Behind him was a large, black Argonian. His eyes floated like milk-white fishes in a dark sea—narrow and reptilian and terrible.

“Jaree-Ra!” Korman bellowed, picking up his battered flail and scimitar. “I’ve come to kill you!”

The boats slid into the docks at the bottom of the wooden fortress and the Blackbloods jumped onto the dock with practiced swiftness. All of them had their weapons drawn.

“Our quarrel isn’t with you lot,” Korman called, motioning to them. “It’s Jaree-Ra I want. Stand aside and let us settle this.”

The Argonian laughed. “You come to our home, butcher our companions, and then ask for an honorable duel?” He twisted his dagger into Gonja’s back. The smuggler winced and ground his teeth together. His face had been beaten badly, and he had the orb-like eyes of a man who expected to die very soon.

“If you’re not feeling honorable, you can all come charging up here. But look around first.” Korman waved his scimitar at the corpses that littered the grotto. “Only one more person has to die today. If I kill Jaree-Ra, the rest of you can keep on breathing.”

“And if I kill you?” Jaree asked.

Korman shrugged. “These two are Brotherhood. If I’m dead, their contract is void. You can kill my partner and that’ll be the end of it.”

The Blackbloods all looked to Jaree-Ra. Narova could see on their faces none of them were anxious to go charging up the ramps at them. Jaree must have seen that, too.

“Fair enough.” He threw Gonja out of the way, drew a Dwarven sword with his free hand, and stalked up the ramp. His claws clicked against the wood with each step. The rest of his men stayed put.

Korman wiped at a cut on his brow with his forearm. “The chests are down there,” he motioned with his head to a half-sunken ship in the water. “If he kills me, might be he’ll actually let you go. But, if it was me, I’d make a pass at all that Moon Sugar. Bloody fortune.”

He spat and headed down the ramp.

“What do we do?” Narova asked Arnbjorn.

“We watch,” he said.

Jaree-Ra and Korman met on an open, middle landing that was build from half an old ship deck. The Argonian backed out almost to the bow, keeping his white eyes fixed on the Nord. Narova moved to the edge of the rocky shelf so she could see better.

“Make your move, you pale hunk of meat,” Jaree-Ra hissed.

Korman bulled forward, swinging the flail down at the same time he swung the scimitar in a violent sideways arc. Jaree-Ra moved like lightning. Leaping above both cuts and pressing his feet against the high bow of the ship.

For a moment, he was perched there at an impossible angle, muscles coiled and tightened as Korman yanked both of his weapons backwards out of the wood. Then the Argonian was rocketing forward in a blur. His golden sword flashed out as he careened past Korman, who barely had time to pull his sword across his body and parry the strike.

Jaree-Ra hit the ground on a roll and snapped back to his feet, sword up and ready. Neither of them moved for a few seconds. Narova wondering what the hell they were doing, and then she noticed something.

Jaree-Ra wasn’t holding a dagger anymore.

Korman dropped to his knees. That’s when Narova spotted the hilt of the dagger jammed into his liver. Leaking blood. He dropped both his weapons at the same time and looked up at Narova. Nodded once.

Then Jaree-Ra took three steps forward and cut his head off.

The Argonian motioned to one of his men down below, who grabbed Gonja from behind. He didn’t even have time to scream before one of the other Blackbloods cut his throat.

Arnbjorn sighed. "That didn't go well."

The lizard looked up at them from the middle platform. Narrowed his reptilian eyes. "What'll it be?"

Arnbjorn turned to Narova, looking for an answer in her eyes. "No shame in keeping our lives," he offered.

"Do you really believe that?" she asked, drawing her dagger from its sheath.

He smiled. "No, not really." But instead of raising his warhammer over his head and charging down the ramp, he tossed it into the water below, never taking his eyes off of Narova. "When it's over, we'll see if you still want to fuck me."

"What do you—" Narova started to say. But it had already begun.

Arnbjorn's nails rippled and extended in his hands. He dropped down to his knees and curled into a tight ball. His limbs twisted and rearranged—the grotesque popping of his cartilage filled Narova's ears. Hair grew from everywhere. Thick and silver and tangled.

The Beast.

He took one look at her with yellow, ravenous eyes, and then he jumped off the shelf, landing amidst the Blackbloods.

"Werewolf!" One of them yelled.

And that was the last intelligible sound Narova heard before the screams began.

It was havoc. The wolf raked across one man's face with his right claw at the same time he disemboweled another with his left. Pulled his guts out and flung them across the ground.

They tried to stab it. Tried touch it, even, but he moved too fast—churning through them like a gust of wind on an open plain. There was nothing there to stop the Beast.

It came up behind an Orcish Marauder, yanked his head off, and threw it at a Breton so hard that it smashed his face in and killed him. When a Nord took a swing at it with an axe, the Beast ducked and then punched a hole all the way through his chest, ripped out his heart, and threw it into it's own mouth before charging at three more men. They were all dead before they'd even pulled their weapons back for an attack.

Narova was mesmerized by the violence. The unbridled power of it all. Then she caught a snap of movement from the corner of her eye.

Jaree-Ra. Coming towards her.

He surged up the wooden ramp. Click, click, click as each claw hit the ground. His sword was pulled back and ready to strike.

“Elf bitch!” he roared, flying through the air.

He was too fast for her. If she dodged him, he’d get her on the next strike, or the one after. It would be over in ten seconds or less. She knew that.

Only one thing to do.

She rushed inside his sword stroke and pressed her left hand against his chest.

Stop. She whispered.

Jaree-Ra hit the ground like a stump. His sword clattered off into the shadows. Narova was lucky it the paralysis spell had worked. She still fucked it up more than half the time when she practiced.

The Argonian was only still for a second. Movement was twitching back into his spine and legs when Narova stabbed him five times in the neck.

Enough to sever every artery that lizard fuck had in him.

Black blood pumped out onto the ground. Jaree-Ra bubbled some last pathetic moan out of his snout and then died.

The sounds of the screams came back into focus. Shriill, anguished screams of dismembered and disemboweled people. The last of them were trying to run, and the Beast was snatching them up by the ankle one by one and smashing their skulls into the ground. Each one made a wet crunch.

When they were all gone the Beast sniffed the air and snapped its head around to her.

Slowly, so very slowly, it began to stalk up the ramps towards her. Yellow eyes still brimming with rage and hate and hunger.

Narova backed up into one of the cabins. The Beast followed. She kept backing up.

Slowly. Slowly. Nice and slow.

When she felt the wall pressing up behind her, Narova flipped her dagger into a reverse grip and prepared to die screaming.

And then the yellow wolf-eyes cooled off. Turned back into the ice-blue lakes Narova recognized. The wolf curled over—it’s silver hide burning away to nothing. Animal limbs shrinking back down to human size in a matter of seconds.

Arnbjorn rose up. Naked and covered in blood. He looked around the room, still trying to shrug off the last of the Beast within. Sniffed once.

Then he looked at Narova.