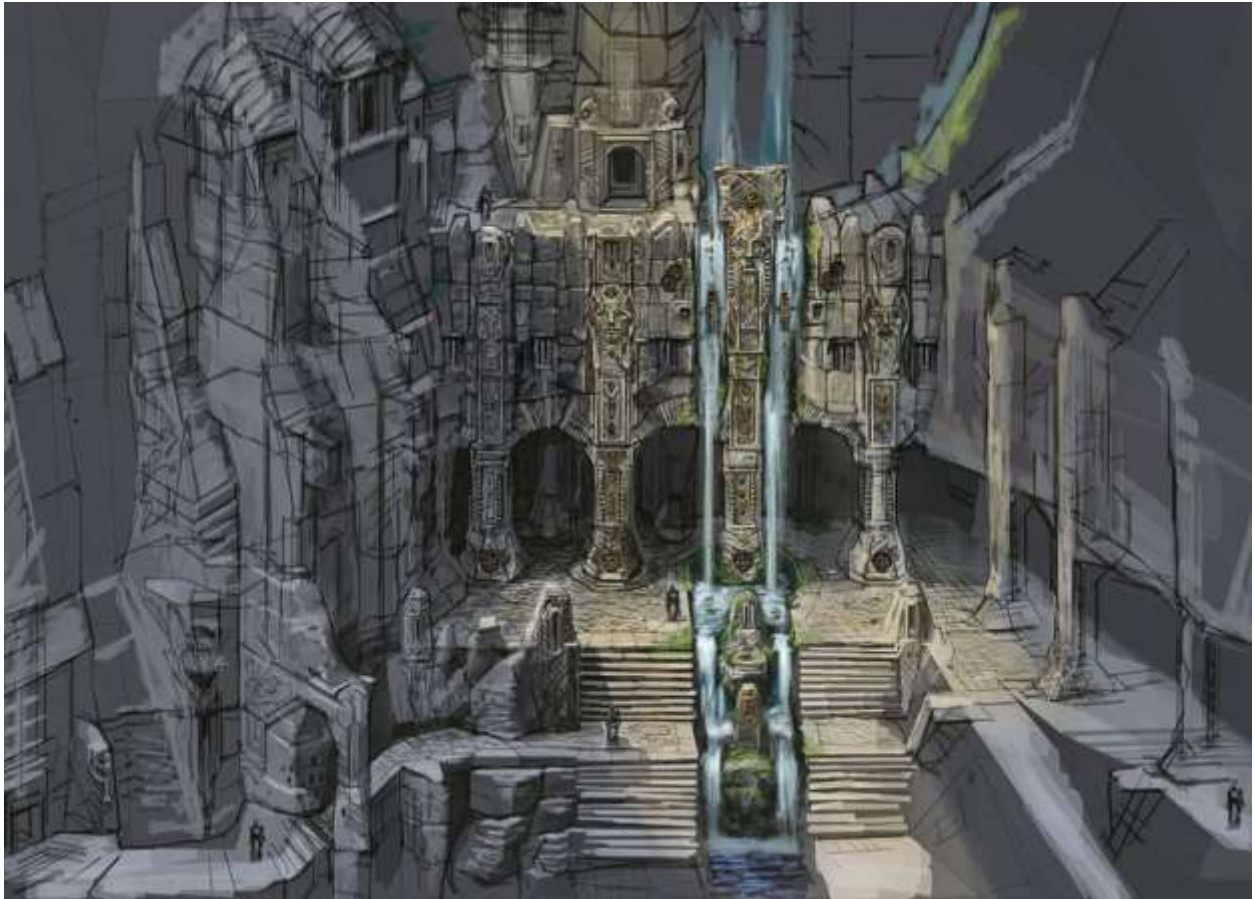


Revenge in Markarth



The Narova Stories: Book III

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Table of Contents

The Merchant of Markarth.....	1
An Argonian Blood Debt.....	4
Sujava's Villa.....	7
The Reckoning.....	12

The Merchant of Markarth

Sujava's morning was not going well.

His Argonian manservant, Kreeves, had woken him a full hour early because he'd mixed up the appointment schedules. At six o'clock Kreeves had burst into Sujava's chambers, attempting to rouse him for a fictional meeting with a mining baron that would not actually occur for another week.

To make things worse, Kreeves had burnt the sausages and over-steeped his tea. Not for the first time. Sujava kept the reptile around because he was a capable bodyguard—and had successfully slain half a dozen would-be-assassins—but the man was a terrible servant.

Sujava knew that he should really hire another body man, and just keep Kreeves around for protection, but the extra cost niggled in his mind.

He was the wealthiest man in Markarth, but Sujava despised unnecessary expenses.

The truly bad news came after he'd finished breakfast and was going over his correspondence in the courtyard. The birds were out and drinking from one of his massive stone fountains, this one carved into the likeness of Vivec. The birds were chirping away happily as he ripped open letters with an ivory-handled knife. (Made from mammoth tusk—very expensive.)

But the contents of the letters were anything but happy. In the course of fifteen minutes, Sujava learned three very troubling things: His spice galley that had been destined for the Somerset Isles had been captured by Bosmer pirates off the coast of Vallenwood. The crew was presumed dead. Four entire wagonloads of Guar meat from his caravan crossing the Alik'r Desert had spoiled during the journey, quartering his profits. And lastly, a smuggler's ship that was supposed to bring him five chests of Moon Sugar had run aground outside of Solitude and been destroyed.

In so far as he could tell, Sujava had lost about 300,000 Septims in one morning.

He hurled his knife at the fountain, scattering the small birds in every direction. The handle of the knife cracked in half, and for a few moment the only sound was the steady gurgling of the fountain.

"Bad news, sir?" Kreeves said from his post behind Sujava. The Argonian always stood where he could keep his eyes on all of the entrances and exits to a room.

“No,” Sujava snapped. “I’m throwing utensils around out of joy.”

“Joy and anger often look the same on you,” Kreeves pointed out.

Sujava closed his eyes, pressed a thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose, and sighed.

It wasn’t that much money, in the grand scheme of things. He had another dozen ships invested in other journeys, and wagons in at least twenty caravans all over Tamriel. He’d earn back the loss in a moon’s turn.

Still, it irked him. Sujava did not like losing money.

He thought about having Kreeves go down into the city and buy him a whore—something exotic, a Redguard or an elf, maybe—but thought better of it. He wasn’t really in the mood for sexual pleasure. He had a better idea.

Sujava stood up and retied the sash on his silk robe. The Imperial merchant had become plump and pale in his middle years. There was a time when he’d maintained a perfect body—spent every morning killing himself with exercises and training. But, eventually he’d learned that money got you a lot further than aerobics, and he’d let himself expand, one sweet roll at a time.

“I’m going to the basement. Need to blow off some steam.”

Kreeves mumbled something Sujava couldn’t hear.

“What’s that?” He asked, turning to his manservant. “Speak up, I don’t understand reptilian groans.”

“It’s just that...the one you’d been keeping down there, the Orc. He’s gone.”

“Escaped? Kreeves, I told you after that black haired elf-bitch escaped that if another one ever got away it’d be you in the chains next!”

“No, sir. I mean he died.”

Sujava paused. “Really?”

“In considerable pain. I believe the stump of his right leg mortified.”

Well, that just put the icing on the cake. Sujava’s day was entirely ruined. Breakfast was terrible, he’d lost a small fortune, wasn’t in the mood to screw anyone, and didn’t have anyone to torture.

“I am vexed,” Sujava said.

"I've told you several times," Kreeves began, "you should allow me to cauterize the amputations. The...subjects...will last longer that way."

The Argonian fidgeted uncomfortably. His snake-like eyes darted around to each of the courtyard doors, as if he might attempt to escape from the conversation through one of them.

"I do not need your input on matters of torture," Sujava said, walking over to the other side of the table and filling a tumbler with Cyrodill brandy. It was early in the day, but what else did he have to do?

"What I do need, Kreeves, is for you to fetch me another subject for the basement."

The reptile's jaw tightened. "Sir, I picked up the Orc just a week ago. It is not prudent to take another from the city so soon." He paused, choosing his next words carefully. "The guards will start asking questions, and before long we'll have to move again. Do you not remember Anvil?"

Sujava waved a dismissive hand. "Yes, yes. I remember. Go out and get a Forsworn or something. Nobody cares about them. Isn't that why we moved to this Dwarven shithole in the first place?"

Kreeves looked at his feet. "A Forsworn. Yes, I can do that. Do you have a preference on the gender?"

Sujava thought about that. "Male. But not as powerful as that Orc. He was too used to pain. Get one with magical abilities. Those are the most fun."

Kreeves nodded. "I will send up some off-duty guards to look after the place while I am away. Do not leave the estate while I am gone. The Nords are not as careful as I am."

"Be back before nightfall. I need a diversion."

Sujava gulped down the contents of the tumbler before Kreeves had crossed the courtyard. He was already pouring himself another glass when the Argonian slipped through the strong, oak door.

An Argonian Blood Debt

Kreeves restrained the male Forsworn in the basement and then went outside to vomit.

Obtaining the prisoner had not been easy. His master, Sujava, frequently overlooked the effort that was required to satisfy his perverse inclinations. Kreeves spent two days out in the wilderness searching for a camp that was small enough for him to murder everyone inside, save for a single prisoner.

A male, magically inclined prisoner at that.

He'd finally found a camp of eleven people. Risky—even for him—to attack that many. But Kreeves had been tired and cold, and often found that risks to his own life did not move him as much as they once did.

He killed three of them silently—a dagger across the throat. And when a loudmouth Forsworn looter raised the alarm Kreeves skewered the other seven with his spear.

And took one Briarheart prisoner. Drug his struggling ass ten miles back to Markarth under cover of darkness.

When he returned to Sujava's villa, he was chastised for not finding the Forsworn within a day as his master had asked.

Kreeves spit out one final glob of vomit—disgusted with himself—and then went back inside to tell his master that the basement was prepared.

How did it come to this? Kreeves wondered as he walked down the long, marble hallway. He had once been a proud Saxhleel—a defender of Blackmarsh. Kreeves had once singlehandedly taken sixty Imperial scalps in one night. Stacked them up in a pile and danced around them, laughing.

It was a legendary feat, still told by firelight in Black Marsh.

“Okan-Shei-Kreeves,” they had called him. “The Spear of Quiet Fury.”

Now he was just “Fury.” Simplified for the sake of his master's slow tongue.

But he was regret and disgust, too. Even if they weren't in his name, those were the things he carried.

Kreeves turned up a spiral staircase and sniffed the air, felt the temperature change as he rose. The butt of his spear tapped out each stone step. The villa smelled empty, but he was always alert.

Always waiting for the next dagger in the dark.

Sujava produced enemies almost as quickly as he produced money. Merchants he had ripped off. Owners of wrecked ships that Sujava had insured, but refused to reimburse. Skooma dealers he had betrayed. The vengeful relatives of people he had tortured and killed in his basement.

Plus that one black-haired elf that had escaped.

The list went on. It gave Kreeves a headache to consider the legions of people who wanted Sujava dead. He was the only thing standing between them. And so, for the seventh time that day, as Kreeves approached the massive Dwarven door leading to his master's chambers, he asked himself:

Why do I do this?

Once, there was a good reason. Sujava had rescued Kreeves from an Imperial prison deep beneath Gideon—ending months of torture and starvation.

The Praefect in charge of the fort had cut off his feet and hands every morning and then laughed as Kreeves writhed on the ground, drowning in the agony of regeneration.

Every day. Two feet. Two hands. Then laughter.

"I asked for their most dangerous prisoner," Sujava had said as the fort faded in the distance. Kreeves was hunched over in the back of the cart, still suffering from the morning's final amputations. "They said it took fifteen men to capture you. That true?"

"It took thirty," Kreeves said, wincing. "Fifteen is all that survived."

Sujava had pursed his fat lips together. "Well, it cost me fifty thousand Septims to get you out of that shithole, so you better be the most vicious reptilian bastard there is. I've bought entire ships for less." He snorted and spat off the side of the cart. "What is it your people call it when someone saves your life?"

"Uskejej-a-rakai."

"I don't speak your lizard language."

"A blood debt."

"That's right. And how long do those last?"

"Until one of us is in the ground."

Sujava smiled. "You're mine now, Kreeves. And we're going to have a lot of fun together."

For a long time, that had been enough. A blood debt was sacred to Kreeves' people. Breaking one meant that he would never return to the Hist. Never be born again. The permanent death of an outcast Saxhleel.

But his dark deeds were piled high now. Far higher than the scalps of those sixty Imperials. Kreeves wondered sometimes if the Hist Tree would understand, should he break his oath and kill Sujava. Perhaps, in its infinite wisdom, even forgive him.

Today is not the day that I take that leap. Kreeves thought as he opened the door.

Inside, Sujava was sprawled out on a velvet cushion in the center of the vast room. A warm fire crackled in the corner and there were two Altmer prostitutes massaging him. One was behind him rubbing his shoulders and the other was working on his feet. Both of them were naked—their golden skin shimmered in the firelight.

Sujava insisted on only being massaged by Altmer females. "They have the best fingers," he often said.

The merchant's eyes opened lazily as Kreeves entered. "Nothing like a lizard to ruin my relaxation," he complained. "I was just about to have them start on my cock."

"Your....guest has arrived," Kreeves said.

Sujava smiled. "Good."

He sprang up, kicking one Altmer in the face as he crossed the room.

"Pay them and remove them," Sujava said as he passed.

"Yes, Master."

Sujava's Villa

Narova slipped into Sujava's villa at midnight. Invisible and silent—a ghost melting into the stone walls and the pale light. Her scent was the only thing that betrayed her presence. Small traces of the Pine Forest that still lingered on her palms and the strands of her midnight-murky hair.

But traces of pine were enough to give her away.

The spear came flying out of the shadows as Narova was crossing the courtyard. Nothing more than a soft hiss cutting through the cool night air. And no more than half a second for her to try and dodge it.

She was fast, but not that fast. The barbed point dug into her right thigh and pulled a stone-sized chunk of flesh away as it sailed off the long cliff that bordered one side of Sujava's courtyard.

Nothing but air, rocks, and a fatal plunge below.

Narova felt her invisibly spell being pulled from her skin, and she cursed at the burning pain in her leg.

Same spot I took that fucking arrow on my first job, Narova thought. Can't catch a break.

A slab of darkness separated from an alcove on the far wall, and the Argonian appeared.

Narova was hoping that dangerous bastard would have found another master by now. It would have made her revenging a lot easier. But it looked like she was finally out of luck.

He already had another spear in his hand, but didn't seem keen on throwing it.

That's his last weapon, then.

Narova backed up a few paces and moved to her left, keeping the massive stone table in the center of the courtyard between them.

"I remember you," she said. "You're the bodyguard. Sleeves, is it?"

The Argonian mirrored Narova's footsteps. Each one of them light and precise.

“Okan-Shei-Kreeves is my name.” His narrow lizard eyes darted around the roof of the courtyard quickly, looking for other intruders. Then back to her. “I remember you, too. The black-haired elf that escaped.”

Narova tested some weight on her leg. It was bad. Fighting him on even ground would be hard enough—this was downright stupid. But she wasn’t going to run away. Not after all of this.

“Don’t suppose you’d be willing to just let me pass?” she asked. “You might not have noticed, but your Master is an evil bastard.”

Kreeves crouched down, readying his spear for violence.

“We are all evil bastards, elf.”

Narova Blackhair squinted her eyes and tried to steady her breath.

“Blood, then.”

He nodded once, and rushed towards her. Hitting the table with one leg and rocketing forward.

He wasn’t the first Argonian to bum-rush Narova, though. She ducked to her right and caught his wrist with her left hand. Pushed every ounce of paralysis she had into his reptilian skin.

Nothing happened.

In an instant, his spear was whirling towards her. The wood shaft caught her in the temple—flooding her vision with white—and she barely had time to leap back out of range as the spearpoint rushed forward in two fast jabs.

It was all Narova could do to pull a throwing knife from her hip and chuck it haphazardly in his direction. He ducked it easily, but it was enough to keep him away for a moment while her vision leveled out.

In a fight, two or three heartbeats of rest were precious.

Kreeves danced away to the right, and she twisted to keep him in sight.

“Powerful magic,” he said. “It would seem you’ve become more than just the wayward hunter who I picked up outside of Anvil.”

Narova didn’t respond. She was too focused on his steps and his spear-arm, looking for a weakness. He moved like water—fluid and fast and inexorable.

She was in trouble.

Narova only had time for a handful of breaths before he was on her again. This time she focused on dodging his spear thrusts, which flicked out like a snake's tongue testing the air for prey.

They came in a flurry of highs and lows—no sooner had she rolled away from one thrust than another was coming right at her chest. In less than a minute she was panting and covered in sweat. Backing up and circling and desperate for more room. Fucking courtyard. Fucking cliff.

Kreeves didn't even seem winded.

Narova knew she wouldn't last much longer. Time to try something different.

Something fancy.

She edged over towards the table, letting her focus on his thrusts dim just enough so she could weave a spell together.

Back, back, back. Just a little more.

She came up alongside the table—which still had a glass sitting half full on the edge—and feigned a slip. Let her knee buckle and her dagger drop. Pain shuddered through her wounded right leg.

Kreeves hesitated just for a split second to adjust his spear for a killing thrust.

That was all she needed.

Narova gnashed her teeth together and flung the cup into the air with her mind. It crashed into the lizard's temple, shattering instantly and splashing liquid into his eyes.

The spear passed harmlessly over her left shoulder, and Narova lunged forward with her dagger.

Even with a face full of wine Kreeves was fast. Narova got him with two quick slashes to his face and throat, but missed her killing stroke. She ducked down and tried to jab into his liver but he was already dancing away. She only managed to drag a few scales off of his hip.

Kreeves skipped back a dozen yards and shook his head, clearing it out. Dark blood poured down his chest and onto his spear-arm.

"Clever," he said.

“Like you said, more than a hunter.”

Narova could see the gills in his neck opening and closing, like a hooked fish gulping for air.

So you do get tired. Best keep you that way.

Narova grabbed at his spear with her mind. Pulled it up towards the sky. She managed to lift it almost a foot before the lizard tightened his grip and pulled it back down with a grunt.

With gritted teeth she bulled forward, still pulling the spear upwards with all of her strength. Her telekinesis slowed him down just enough for her to sneak inside his spear thrust and ram her dagger into his chest.

He growled in pain, then mashed his head into her face.

One, two, three.

Narova felt her nose break and her cheek crack. Terrible noises. The warm feel of blood pouring from both nostrils. But no pain yet.

She stabbed him again but couldn't keep a grip on the hilt. They both wound up on the ground—punching and biting and clawing at each other with their bare hands. His lizard-breath was everywhere. Steamy and rotten in her broken nostrils.

Somehow he got behind her. Wrapped a scaly arm around her throat and cut off her air. Narova tried to hit him, but he'd wedged himself in too close and she couldn't reach him. Her eyes bulged and she looked down at the cliff in front of her. Only darkness and the sound of rushing water below.

Her vision filled with spots. Then the black started closing in.

“I'm sorry, elf,” Kreeves rasped from behind her in his reptile voice.

Narova ran her hand along his chest, searching desperately for the dagger-hilt.

“See you in the next life,” he said.

His fingers clenched down even tighter, breaking her skin.

Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.

Narova's hand finally found the dagger wedged between two scales on his right side. She yanked it free with the last bit of strength in her body.

Then she crammed it backwards into his eye.

He let out a primal howl and slacked off on his grip just enough for Narova to take a breath and slip one hand around his scaly arm. Then she hurled her weight forward, flipping him over her shoulder and off the cliff.

Kreeves was still screaming when he hit the rocks below.

Narova sucked in air as fast as she could, feeling her neck to see if he'd gotten to one of her arteries. Didn't seem like it.

Just more scars added to the landscape of marred flesh.

Far below she thought she caught the black flicker of a body being rushed away in the water. Into the Forsworn hills.

Her mouth and neck were covered in blood. More of it pumping out of her nose in a thick, red torrent. Narova pulled some cloth from her pocket and wadded a piece into each nostril.

Then she picked up Kreeves' spear and walked towards the door.

The Reckoning

Sujava was about two seconds away from coming when the spear burst through his right shoulder with a sickening crunch.

The elf whore who was on her knees in front of him lifted her head up—his cock dropping unceremoniously out of her mouth—and started to scream.

The shrill, high-pitched wail of surprise and fear.

Sujava didn't feel any pain yet. Just a dull ache pinning him in place. *Kreeves must have turned against me*, he figured. *Need to run*. He tried to move forward from the plush sofa on which he'd been getting his blow job.

Then he felt the pain.

A rippling, burning thing that started in his shoulder and radiated throughout his entire body. His cock shriveled into a nub no bigger than a child's toe within seconds. And then Sujava screamed.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The crazed, terrible cry of absolute terror.

The whore stood up and ran for the door, which gaped open on its hinges. She was almost to the threshold when a thin arm burst from the shadow and hit her in the chest. For a moment, she was enveloped in green, and then she fell to the floor with a thud.

Narova Black Hair emerged from the darkness. Her body was lithe and black and lean. Her face a bloody ruin. She glanced down at the paralyzed, naked elf at her feet.

"Fucking whores," Narova muttered.

Then she looked up and narrowed her eyes at Sujava.

She began to walk forward.

"No..." Sujava whispered, so softly he could barely hear it himself. Then louder: "No, no, no, no, no!"

With slow, even strides Narova crossed the room. Her body seemed to drink up the orange light from the wall sconces like some black, endless pit going down into the earth.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," she hissed with each step. "Your time has come, Sujava."

He tried to moved again, but the pain was even worse this time. And the spear didn't budge.

"Please, please," he sobbed. "I'm rich. Wealthy beyond measure. Whoever hired you, I'll beat their offer. Beat it by a hundred times."

"You cannot buy your way out of this, *Sujava*." She said his name as if the very sound of it tasted rotten inside of her mouth.

"A thousand times!" he yelled. "Please, I'll give you everything I have. *Everything!*"

She stopped a foot away from his impaled body and looked at him. Her dark, pitiless eyes burning down into him. Sujava glanced at her face for a second and immediately turned away.

"Look at me, Sujava."

He could only cower more, trying to burrow his head into his chest like a turtle hiding in its shell.

Narova's hand shot out, clamped down on his jaw and yanked his face upwards.

"LOOK AT ME, FUCKER!" she snarled, spit and blood flying from her mouth.

Slowly, he leveled his small, wet eyes and looked on her face.

"No...it cannot be. It cannot be...*you*."

He remembered her—the wood elf that he'd kept in his basement for almost half a year. He had never been able to break her, even in all that time. She had stayed wild and vicious to the bitter end. And one night, she'd simply vanished. Disappeared in the night.

Sujava shat himself.

The brown filth oozed into the cushion below him. The smell filled the air.

Narova moved to her left a step to avoid the small river of shit that ran down the sofa. She kept one hand on his jaw and punched him three times in the face with the other.

One, two, three.

Sujava's nose snapped and popped and buckled. Blood filled his mouth. Narova let go of his face and backed away.

"That bodyguard of yours did a number on me." She pointed to her own broken face. "You didn't deserve a warrior like that protecting you. We're square, for that at least."

He looked at her again, eyes brimming with tears of pain. Shaking his head slowly.

“But your debt is far from paid,” she said.

Narova wrapped her fingers around one of his ears and ripped it off of his head.

“AAAAAHHHH,” he howled. Neck veins bulging.

“That’s for whipping my back into a piece of fucking skeever meat!”

She tore off his other ear and flung it across the room.

“And that’s for pulling out my fucking fingernails and feeding them to me!” she hissed.

“Do you remember doing that? DO YOU?!”

“I’m sorry…” he moaned. “I’m…forgive me.”

That gave Narova pause.

“Forgive you? All right, I’ll forgive you. Here,” she grabbed the shaft of the spear with both hands, “sorry about stabbing you with this, let’s rectify the problem immediately.”

She ripped the spear out of his body—the barbed tip pulled a bundle of nerves and meat and flesh with it.

Sujava shrieked and howled. It felt like she’d torn off his entire arm. Blood pumped out of him in a thick torrent.

“You’re a fucking monster!” he screamed.

“No, Sujava. *You’re* the monster. I’m just your nightmare come alive.”

Behind them, the whore had managed to stand up. “What are you doing?” she called, she sounded like a drunken child, still weighed down by Narova’s spell.

“Run away, girl,” Narova called without turning around. “Run far away.”

The whore did not need to be asked twice. The sound of her feet shuffling on the stone moved down the hallway and disappeared.

“You’re going to bleed to death in about thirty seconds,” Narova observed, her voice strangely calm now.

Sujava moaned. “Please…you don’t have to do this.”

Narova shrugged. “No, I don’t.”

She removed a small glass bottle from the pouch on her hip.

A potion.

“I could give this to you. I had it made specifically for this moment.” She tossed the bottle back and forth between each hand. “Would you like that, Sujava? Would you like me to save your life?”

“Gnnnnn,” he mumbled. And nodded his head.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Give it to me....yes.”

“Tell me why. Give me one good reason and it’s yours.”

He paused. Swallowed. Rooted around in his mind for something to say.

“Mercy...” he whined. “For the sake of mercy.”

Narova sighed. “So predictable. Clinging to life like a piece of shit clings to a cow’s asshole.”

She uncorked the bottle and slowly poured the deep-green liquid over Sujava’s hemorrhaging shoulder. The room filled with a thick, earthy scent. Like acres of moss stretching along a forest floor. It was warm, too. So warm.

“You should have let yourself die,” Narova whispered to him as the last of the liquid drained from the bottle. “That was your chance for my mercy, but you didn’t take it.”

The pain in his body disappeared. Melted down to nothing. A forgotten nightmare. And for a few blissful moments, Sujava was at peace.

Then the roots began to grow inside of him.

They were small at first—wispy tendrils of a newborn tree. But they grappled for life, nurtured and fueled by the blood in his veins.

“The lesson to be learned from this,” Narova said, “is that you shouldn’t accept a gift from a woman who just tore off both of your ears. There’s likely to be...a catch.”

The roots weren’t tickling now. They were digging. Burrowing into his skin and expanding their reach. Sujava felt wood breaking through skin and muscle and tissue and bone. It was a new kind of pain—to feel something growing inside of you with reckless abandon.

Using you for food, like some bucket of soil.

He screamed. The nameless, heart-rending screech of a man being eaten alive.

Narova watched him and smiled.

His noises were cut off when the wood pushed into his throat. Turned his vocal chords to oak. Then the pain moved higher, and Sujava felt his head burst into a thousand different directions as his skull was split open and leaves came sprouting out.

“The alchemists promised me that you would survive,” Narova said. “That a human part of you would remain. Always. Are you in there, Sujava? Do you remember me?”

He was in there. The last remnants of his face still showed in the bark. His eyes nothing more than discolored ovals. But they saw her. They remembered her.

And Narova Black Hair knew it.

She ran one hand over what used to be his face. Her touch felt warm on his wooden skin.

“Yes, you’re in there.” She patted him lightly. “I’m going to come visit you, Sujava. Every few months or years, maybe. And I’m going to cut pieces off of you. All of the best pieces that you work so hard to grow.” She shrugged. “And when I die, I’m going to have someone else do it for me. And someone else after that. Snip, snip, snip down through the generations.”

She made a cutting motion with her fingers.

“They say an oak tree can live for thousands of years. I hope that’s true. I hope that when my bones are ground down to dust, you’re still here dreading the next time those doors will open and someone will come in brandishing a pair of pruning shears.”

She stepped forward and pried a strip of bark off his face with her knife. It was agony. Like she had started a fire on him and left it there to burn.

“See you later, Sujava. Don’t go anywhere.”

Narova turned and walked towards the door, laughing to herself.

She didn’t look back.

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