

Tattoos and Silk

The Narova Stories: Book VI



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Mortimer and the Elf

Mortimer found the girl near dusk, when the dying of the sun had thrown up a weary assortment of reds and oranges into the sky. A last stitch effort to make an impression before nightfall. He'd known a whore in Riften who used to prattle on about the majesty and beauty of those final pieces of daylight. Used to say it gave her a reason to live.

But the sunset did not move Mortimer. Few things did these days.

Half of northern Skyrim had been covered in that steaming purple water—farms and valleys turned into boiling lakes overnight. Thousand-year tundra pines burned down to nubs in the space of an afternoon. Some said the entire population of Dawnstar was boiled alive and then raised back to life through some unnatural process. Set to roaming the scorched countryside with murderous intent.

How could a pretty bunch of pretty colors above compete with such ugliness below?

And besides all that, Mortimer had been out in the wilds for near a month now—trapping elk and bears and not having much success at it. His old partner, Ajorn, had promised him an easy stretch of labor followed by a long stint filled with all the brandy and ale he could stomach.

And Mortimer could stomach quite a bit of both.

But Ajorn had slipped and shot himself in the face with his own damned crossbow, and that left Mortimer to his own devices. He'd played his hand at a number of trades in his life and come up on the losing end each time:

Alchemy in his youth, which he'd had to abandon after accidentally blinding a man. Soldiering for the empire in his prime, until he took an arrow to the knee and had to give it up. Then banditry, for lack of a better idea. All that had earned him was betrayals and jail time.

There was no denying it, each of Mortimer's vocations had been filled and punctuated with failure.

Trapping was no different.

So Mortimer had been left wandering the outskirts of the Flooded Lands, hoping to stumble on something of value that had washed clear in all that ruin and destruction.

There were stories of Daedric armor and priceless gems being found in areas where the waters had started to subside.

Instead, he found the girl.

Mortimer squatted on a flat rock—leaning back on his haunches and picking at his teeth with the point of his dagger—and watched her.

She was naked. Probably a Bosmer, although it was difficult to tell for sure with her body curled up and her jet-black hair covering her face and ears. She had the lean limbs of a Wood Elf, at least.

But it wasn't her nakedness that held the lion's share of Mortimer's attention just then. And the odd way that the current of steaming water had diverted around the girl on both sides—leaving her to sleep unharmed on an island or sorts—was certainly curious, seeing as the waters seems bent on destroying most everything else available. But that strangeness wasn't particularly compelling to him, either.

No. Mortimer's attention was almost entirely focused on the sword she had between her arms. She cradled the thing like a mother might hold a newborn. The scabbard was made from polished ebony wood, inlaid with silver. The grip wrapped in what looked like red silk.

That was a sword that a man could sell, Mortimer figured. Stay drunk for a month or two off the coin he made.

And all Mortimer had to do was hop over and grab it. It'd be far easier than capturing wild animals.

Resolved to action, Mortimer took one last dig at his teeth and then sheathed the dagger on his hip. He stood up and stretched his legs a few times. Rubbed his hands together. The girl hadn't so much as twitched a finger in the half hour he'd been watching her. Only reason he knew she wasn't dead was the steady rise and fall of her rib cage.

Mortimer blew out the air in his own lungs and leapt out over the purple water.

He landed one foot in the protected area of grass and rock that the elf slept on. Tottered briefly—other foot hanging dangerously over the death water—and then found his balance. The little island wasn't more than six paces across, so Mortimer didn't have to go far before he was leaning over the girl. Definitely a Wood Elf.

Up close, though, she was a bit more alarming.

Her back was crossed and notched with more scars than Mortimer had ever seen collected in one place. Looked like a Dremora had danced a fucking jig on top of her for a week straight. The side of her face that he could see had a snaking scar running across the bridge of her nose and up along her cheek.

Whatever person or god had been charged with her safety, they'd done a piss poor job holding up their end of the bargain.

But worst of all, there was a crescent-shaped gash running vertical across her ribcage—starting just below her tit and curving down near her naval. The rest of her scars looked like they'd seen a turn or two under the sun, but this one was fresh.

And glowing purple, same as the water that seemed so intent on not killing her. Though the rest of the world seemed to have given it a pretty decent try.

Mortimer snuck forward and got one hand wrapped around the grip of the sword. Gently—so very, very gently—he pulled the blade away from her body. He hadn't budged the thing further than a finger's width before the elf's eye snapped open.

And then not a heartbeat later Mortimer felt something sharp and cold pressing against the bottom of his chin. His own damned dagger. Still wet from picking between his teeth.

"Who...are you?" the elf asked.

Can't even perform a simple bit of thievery, you moron, Mortimer thought.

"Mo-Mortimer," he said.

The elf wound herself up into a balanced crouch, keeping the dagger fixed beneath his chin the entire time.

"Stand up, Mortimer."

Mortimer, the elf, and the knife all rose together.

She stared at him for a long time—eyes narrowed and hair picked up by the wind. Mortimer risked a quick glance down at her and—in spite of the very real chance he was about to be killed—he couldn't help but feel a stirring in his pants at the sight of lithe, naked body.

"Any reason you can think of I shouldn't shove this bit of cheap steel through your skull?" the elf hissed.

That question stopped the blood flow to his cock pretty abruptly.

"I, uh, yeah I probably can..." he trailed off.

"Let's have it, then." She pressed the dagger into his flesh a little harder. Enough to make him bleed.

Mortimer winced and swallowed. Mind filling with an army of shitty reasons to keep living. Ale, brandy, sunsets, mercy.

"I can lead you out of here!" he half screamed, voice cracking. Not even sure that was true.

"Too thin."

She pulled the dagger back, making ready to slice his throat open. Mortimer closed his eyes. But a few seconds passed and the killing stroke didn't come.

Just silence.

He opened one eye cautiously. The elf still had the dagger drawn back, but she was looking at the purple water rushing around them. As if she was noticing the landscape for the first time.

She lowered the blade.

It had been raining for two straight days. Mortimer figured the leather cord around his wrists was just about worked down to the bone, but he was afraid to look at the damage.

Each passing yank by the Elf drove the thing deeper. And she was awfully generous with her guidance—keeping him in front but pulling left and right as it suited her.

“Am I leading us out of this country, or are you?” Mortimer snarled after she wrenched him sideways for the third time in as many minutes.

“You’re doing as I tell you,” she said. Voice icy and cold. Mortimer had asked her name but just gotten an especially vicious tug as an answer.

And so they walked. Mortimer doing his best to guide them out of the Flooded Lands and towards Whiterun. The Elf doing her best to make him miserable.

It was rough going—the purple waters had rearranged the entire landscape and nothing was familiar. Maps were useless. The only way Mortimer had to navigate was with the dim, foggy memory of when Ajorn led him into the place weeks ago. The Elf would never have made it without him. It did not seem like she knew exactly how she had gotten to the place he’d found her.

And she was still naked.

Mortimer had offered her an extra one of his furs but the Elf had just snorted and then tied him up. She carried the sword in one hand and lashed the dagger to her left thigh with a spare bit of cord. Mortimer stole backwards glances every hour or so—the flash of her thin, supple frame the only source of respite available in his current predicament. Although even that fleeting pleasure lost its allure once the rain began.

The Elf’s body smoked and steamed at the touch of water—as if her skin was filled with some kind of unnatural heat. And hearing the sound of sizzling droplets burning off the Elf’s skin made it difficult to enjoy a fantasy about fucking her.

For all Mortimer knew, she’d burn his prick off.

Mortimer was beginning to wonder if rejoicing at his recently spared life wasn't unlike the time he'd drunkely fucked an Argonian whore and figured himself safe just 'cause his cock had completed the initial deed without getting torn off. He'd come down with crotch sores a few days later, and Mortimer had a sneaking suspicion the Elf still planned to end their relationship with a steel blade through his skull.

The punishment's arrival was just a bit delayed. Same as his cock rot had been.

That night they camped in the wreckage of a fallen tree. The trunk had been violently uprooted and knocked over by something—a storm or a dragon or a giant—which left them with a bit of a roof and space to finally get a fire started. Mortimer crouched so close to it his feet were damn near in the flames.

The Elf sat cross legged with her back against the dirt wall of roots. Sword across her knees, hot breath steaming out into the night. Outline of her tits drawn by the silver light of the moon.

Not a bad view.

As far as Mortimer could tell, the Elf didn't sleep. The last thing he'd seen each night, and the first thing he woke to each morning was her strange pair of eyes—yellow and narrow, with flecks of glowing purple tossed in. Like some kind of demon cat.

"Tomorrow should be the last of the Flooded Plains," Mortimer said between bites of a charred skeever the Elf had caught for them. Killed it with a thrown dagger from near on fifty yards away. "You figure I'll be free to go, once we enter Whiterun?"

The Elf said nothing.

"It's just, that was the bargain. Might be it was struck with a stretch of steel at my throat, but so far as I can tell I've held up my end."

Still nothing.

"And I really am sorry about the whole trying-to-steal-your-sword-while-you-slept, thing. Truly."

"So you've said."

Mortimer perked up at that. Finally got her talking some, and in his experience anytime you got a foothold with a woman, there was another somewhere nearby. That sword, he figured.

"It's a fine blade, have to say." Mortimer gnawed the last bit of meat from the bone and began using the pointy end as a toothpick. "Where'd you get it?"

Her outlandish eyes flicked over to him. Narrowed. Made him feel like an animal she was thinking about killing, but wasn't convinced it would be worth the trouble.

"It was a gift," she said after a while.

"Fine present, indeed!" Mortimer smiled and slapped his knee. "What'd you do to earn such a treasure?"

"I decided not to kill a man."

"Huh." Mortimer's smile faded.

An item designed specifically for murder seemed like a strange reward for sparing a life.

"You know, once we get back to civilization, you're gonna need some clothes," he said, changing the subject. "Not that I mind the view so much, but other folk aren't as polite as me."

She eyed him curiously for a moment and then allowed the smallest hint of a smile to escape from her lips.

"What do you know about civilization?" she asked.

Mortimer was going to crack another joke—which is probably what she expected him to do—but changed his mind.

"I know you don't mix in with it any better than I do," he said softly. "I spent my entire damn life grinding up against the crowd, looking for a spot I'd fit. Never did find one, really. Banditry and violence did suit me for a time, though. Everything else just got me worn down a little closer to the nub."

She blinked once. Then held her eyes on him.

"Whoever you are, Elf," he continued. "And whatever it is you did to end up out in that wilderness," he motioned towards the Flooded Plains they'd come from, "I don't figure you'll be finding your way again in Whiterun. Or any other place of...civilization. It's a different kind of cord that guides people like you and me."

"I know the cord that guides you." She raised her end of the leather rope.

Mortimer shrugged. "I'm just saying...you ain't ever gonna be able to hide all that violence beneath your skin. Doesn't matter how many layers of clothes you heap over it. If you ever decide to try clothes at all, that is."

The Elf looked at him for a long time, saying nothing. Finally she shifted a little in the darkness so she was facing out towards the country they'd crossed, away from Mortimer and the fire.

"Go to sleep, Mortimer."

Might have been wishful thinking on his part, but the Elf's voice seemed just a little bit softer than it had been.

It was cool and crisp when the Elf woke Mortimer with a swift kick to the stomach. He sucked in air. The hope he'd gone to sleep with suddenly replaced by a sickening pain.

"Come on, then," the Elf said.

They set off in familiar form—him in the lead, hands bound by the leather cord. She continued to jerk him around left and right as it pleased her. No hint of mercy or gentleness in her action. Guess he'd been reading the signs wrong.

Again.

Should have just kept quiet, Mortimer thought. Or cried and begged. That works, sometimes. But nobody likes being told they're at odds with the world.

Around midday they crested a small hill. The Plains of Whiterun dumped out below them. Wide and vast and clear. In the far distance, Mortimer could just make out the hazy edges of Whiterun's walls. They could get there by nightfall, he figured.

Before he knew what was happening, his arms were jerked up and the leather cord sliced from his wrists. He turned around to look at the Elf. She backed away a few steps—dagger in one hand, sheathed sword in the other. He waited for her to slip the dagger back into the leather cord around her thigh, but she just stood there. Blade not quite pointed at him, but not pointed away, either.

"People don't generally need to keep their daggers drawn if they have mercy in mind," Mortimer said. "You promised me."

The blade didn't move. "The list of promises I've kept is a deal shorter than the ones broken."

He put his palms up, as if one more try at surrender might finally prove effective.

"Look, I'm a nobody," he said. "I'm not gonna hunt you and I'm not gonna tell a soul about you. I'll forget I ever saw you the second I disappear over that hill."

The Elf gave him a sad look, as if Mortimer was a child who'd just told her the world was a decent, gentle place and the gods were on our side.

"No you won't," she said softly.

The Elf flicked the dagger point-first into the mud and then drew her sword.

Mortimer took a good look at her naked body, lingering a long time on her small, hardened nipples and the raven-black patch of hair between her legs.

As far as dying views went, it wasn't so bad.

He clamped his eyes shut then and pretended that pretty view wasn't about to chop his head off. His heart beat in his chest. Once, twice. Three—

“NAROVA BLACK HAIR!”

The reptilian voice cut through the windy plain like a jagged knife through deer flesh. Mortimer opened one eye, wondering how many times he could close his eyes and get saved by some stroke of luck. There was an Argonian standing on large, flat rock behind them. A long ashen spear in each hand. And behind him, there was a bored looking Dunmer dressed in plain black clothes.

The Elf—or Narova, Mortimer guessed—turned around.

“Okan-Shei Kreeves,” she said calmly, as if the words were a matter-of-fact observation and didn't have anything to do with the six-foot tall reptile who had snuck up on them.

“I have been looking for you,” he flipped one spear around into a throwing grip, “for quite a while now. I thought maybe the darkness up north had claimed you.”

“Not quite.”

“Who is this...person with you?” Kreeves asked. He flicked a pair of disdainful eyes over to Mortimer and then immediately back to Narova.

“Just some dead man.”

Mortimer fidgeted at that, not sure he'd ever been more uncertain what he was supposed to be feeling at that present moment. Fear? Embarrassment? Anger?

“He doesn't look very dead,” the Dunmer observed from his place in the back.

Narova ignored him. Just crouched down a little bit and flexed her sword arm.

“Is this going to be our time?” she asked.

Kreeves nodded slowly.

For a few moments neither of them moved. It was just the wind blowing and all that grass waving like a thousand green fingers that threatened to swallow everything whole and leave the entire situation unresolved. It went on for so long that Mortimer opened his mouth with a plan to say something about how he'd just be on his way, and there was no need to involve him in whatever carnage was about to take place. Opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say. Closed it again.

Kreeves threw his spear.

And then it was the windblown grass's turn to seem slow compared to the flash of the Argonian's scaled wrist and the dark flicker of a wooden missile careening through the air. Mortimer blinked once and Narova was four strides to the left—crouched down with one hand on the grass and looking as lithe and graceful as a sabre cat.

Mortimer had just enough time to wonder what happened to the spear and then he keeled over on his back and puked up an alarming amount of blood. He rolled over on one side to spit it out and squinted up at a tree that seemed to have sprouted up behind him.

He thought it was strange that a tree had escaped his attention earlier, then wondered why it was so thin and straight. Then he tried to take a breath and nothing happened except pain.

And as the darkness came, Mortimer tried his best to keep both eyes open. Because he knew he wouldn't get lucky three times in a row.

NAROVA

Gods he's fast. Coming at me like a lightning bolt made from scales and rage. Spear point snake-tonguing all over the damn place and fuck if I'm going to get puked up by a massive geyser only to be skewered and killed by a damn lizard one week later.

Mortimer is dead. Kreeves threw his first spear straight through the poor bastard's chest.

Although I guess the decapitation I was planning for him wasn't much kinder.

Kreeves doesn't speak. Just keeps on with his relentless attacks. High-right, low-left, middle, throat slash. It doesn't have a pattern and it doesn't let up. The Dark Lord's First Fucking Apprentice wasn't as hard to dodge as this coldblooded bastard.

I knock the spear aside with my sword and try to get in close. Get some damage done. But the quick reptile just skips away and jabs forward again, scraping away a good sized chunk of flesh from my left arm.

There is a hissing sound as my blood meets air. And I know without looking down a simple truth: my insides are boiling just like the purple waters that laid ruined to this frozen land. I've known since I first woke up and found that stringy-haired fuckup trying to steal my sword. I can feel the heat inside—like my bones are white-hot bits of metal and the rest of me is smoldering meat.

I guess the whole "boiling blood" thing is finally something that gives Kreeves pause. He backs off for just a second before attacking again.

And a second is all I need.

I rush hard. Two fast stabs that he parries, but then I'm inside his spear and I crack him in the face twice with the pommel of my sword. He somehow gets my blade tangled up in the shaft of his spear so I start punching with my left hand. Ribs, chest, ear. Everything I can reach.

I go fast and find a strength inside my boiling blood that sets his bones to cracking underneath my assault. Then I press my palm against his chest and prepare to send a blast of paralysis through his body so powerful it stops the fucking grass from waving for a mile in all directions.

But nothing happens.

I figured I've got that finger-up-the-ass look those two Necromancers carried when I hit them with the poisoned darts. But there aren't any darts in my skin.

There's just that Dunmer, lips moving subtle-like. Fingers twitching with spell weaving.

Then there's a clawed foot in my chest and I'm tumbling backwards. End over end. The ground knocks the wind out of me. Kreeves has stayed where he is.

"What's happened to you?" he asks.

I smile even though my chest feels just about kicked in and I know that Dunmer's going to make it very difficult to stay alive these next few minutes.

"Rethinking your plan for revenge?" I ask, standing up slowly.

"I came to kill a black-haired Bosmer," he says. "You are something...else."

"Let's just say I've been traveling a bit since last we met," I say.

He grunts. And I notice by the way he moves that his ribs don't seem quite as broken as they did twenty seconds ago. I threw that fucker off a damn cliff, and somehow I'm the one whose body came out scarred and battered and broken. He looks good as new.

Of all the people I've put in the ground during my life, how is it that the fat, sadistic bastard Sujava is the one who earns such a powerful agent of vengeance?

"You should have let me be," I continue. "Sujava had it coming."

"I did not choose my master. But the oath stands. One of us needs to die today."

And now that old question has returned: fight or run? Last time I chose to fight, I got my soul torn out by Akavarin. That was an unpleasant experience to say the least. So I'm not exactly itching to force the issue with Master-of-the-Spear-Kreeves.

"You sharing your oath with the Dunmer?" I ask, moving to my left a bit. Kreeves mirrors me.

“Call it a mutual interest,” the Dunmer says.

“How about I call it a pain in my ass?”

I bolt forward, right at Kreeves.

He’s ready. When I get into range he jolts his spear forward with a kind of speed and precision that’d get my pussy wet if it wasn’t aimed at my heart. I drop and slide along the grass and his spear point follows my dropping, naked chest. I just barely manage to knock it out of the way so the leaf-shaped point doesn’t skewer anything besides the empty air between my left arm and my heart.

And then I’m up on my feet running again. Right at the Dunmer, this time.

He moves fast enough that I can’t just cut off his head. But he’s not as fast as Kreeves. Not by a long shot.

I put my sword right through his liver. In a messy situation like this I always go for the liver because it’s big and only a half-wit can miss it. Kills a man sure as if a pierced heart, too. It just takes a little longer.

The Dunmer crumples down in the grass and I see a bit of black blood seep from the wound. A good sign. Then I go to cast invisibility so I can finish Kreeves off, too.

Except the gray-skin bastard hasn’t dropped his spell.

I frown and raise my sword, planning to see if he can still cast spells with a length of steel through his skull. But then there’s a shadowy flicker from behind and I dive to my left. Feel a bad kind of pain streaking through my arm, then the snapping of wood. Then I land.

Kreeves’ spearpoint is stuck inside my left forearm. One side looks like a bloody dog’s cock poking out of me. The other is a jagged piece of splintered ash. Both hurt like all hells wrapped into one.

I still can’t cast any of my magic, and Kreeves has already darted back and picked up the spear he used to kill Mortimer.

So now I run.

Kreeves

It takes me three seconds to get my other spear from behind the dead man. But when I turn around Narova is burning off across the Plains of Whiterun at an impossible speed. Each footfall sears a blackened shape into the grass. A puff of smoke rising behind. In another three seconds she is over the crest of a hill and down into some valley. Out of sight.

There's no point chasing something like that. Especially since she's literally burning a trail into the earth behind her.

I walk over and crouch next to Asriel. It seems very much like he's going to die soon.

For the first time since I met him, he is actually absorbed by the current situation. Big, fear-filled eyes trying to get a better look at the wound. Ragged breath. His cloak of indifference stolen away by Narova Black Hair's sword.

Seems the end of his life is the only thing capable of making him take an interest in it.

"The liver?" he asks, voice just above a whisper.

I look down at the blackened, oily blood pooling around him.

"Yes."

He lets his head fall back. Giving up on getting a better look. Swallows hard and then opens and closes his mouth dryly. Like a man dying of thirst in a desert.

"To die like this...most unexpected," he says.

I glance up at the distant, shaggy shape of Whiterun on the horizon. Too far for him to walk. Not too far for me to carry him, maybe. Find a healer who can rebuild the hole in his liver.

But I don't feel a particularly strong inclination to do that.

"You can turn the gears of someone's mind any direction you want, but not heal yourself?" I ask.

He snorts. A little bit of blood trickling from his mouth. "You don't know any magic, do you?"

I shake my head.

"Too bad. Let's just say livers and minds aren't quite the same. Leave it at that." He swallows again.

"Will you carry me?"

"Can't you make me?"

"I've been trying to since you squatted beside me. Seems my Charms are lost on you." He smiles again. Teeth ringed with blood.

I stand up to leave.

"Don't you wonder why she didn't use any magic?" Asriel asks. "I am quite confident she knows some."

I look down at him, but say nothing.

“As long as I live,” he continues, “it’ll stay that way. I am very thorough with my spells. But if I die...she’ll have quite a bit more to throw at you.”

It’s a difficult choice. The Hist only knows how far she’ll be able to get in the time it takes me so save this mysterious Dunmer’s life. But Narova Black Hair did an extremely memorable amount of damage the first time we fought.

And that was before she picked up the boiling blood.

I sigh. Then I plug Asriel’s wound with a handful of Hanging Moss I keep for emergencies. Heave him over my shoulder and head to Whiterun.

He’s grayer than I’d have ever thought possible by the time I kick in Danica Pure-Spring’s door. Put a spear to her throat and make her get to work. But the Nord woman keeps a cool head and dumps a powerful amount of magic into Asriel’s body. Chanting. Humming. Like that.

The Dunmer pulls through.

“He must rest,” Danica says. “The liver is rebuilt, but still fragile. The membrane could rupture at the slightest movement. A sneeze is enough to kill him.”

“A sneeze?” I ask. “The man got stabbed fifteen miles from here. I carried him on my back.”

Danica just shrugs.

“Leave us,” I say. “Tell no one of this or I’ll come back and murder everyone in your temple. You last.”

She closes the door, shaking her head sadly the entire time. I sit down next to Asriel’s bed. Spear in one hand, pack of fresh supplies at my feet.

“Something tells me you managed to work a bit of magic on me after all,” I say.

“Persuasion and magic aren’t the same thing. You made the right decision—the block on Narova’s Illusion and Alternation will hold. She’ll be far easier to kill now. And it’s quite important that she dies, Kreeves.”

I frown. “What’s your stake in this? Sujava’s debt wouldn’t have carried you this far.”

“Do you really care? You’ll try to put her in the ground either way. I could be as evil as Akavarin. Wouldn’t stop you.”

“True.”

“Go, then.”

Narova

I'm running through the outskirts of the swamps beyond Morthal. My situation is not good.

A spear through the arm and a murderous Argonian on my trail. You'd think whatever twisted, otherworldly power had set my blood to boiling would also be able to do something about spear wounds.

It doesn't.

I'm leaking purple and steaming blood all over my damn arm. It's so hot it burns my skin—pulls up blisters scalds the flesh from elbow to fingertip. You'd think the boiling blood would come with insulated skin, or something.

Nope.

Guess I drew the short stick of necromantic curses.

But if there's one upside, it's energy. A lot of it. I've been running flat out for half a day—barely anything but the balls of my feet blinking along the ground in a blur—and my hands aren't even shaking. I don't know how I'm going to get this fucking spear point out of my arm, but at least I don't have exhaustion compounding the problem.

Might be I can just outrun Kreeves. Almost a certainty, really. But I threw that fucker off a cliff and then wandered all across Skyrim—got my soul torn out and then watched the world get rearranged. And he still managed to track me down amidst all that and get a spear into me.

Somehow, I don't think me suddenly being a fast runner is going to settle the issue.

And I still can't use any of my magic.

So without even thinking about it much I steer myself towards the swamp where I hunted Garland the Green. He told me if I was lost and couldn't find my way, he'd help me. I'm not sure if this exactly counts as being lost, but if I've ever needed a bit of help, it's now.

It would have taken a man atop a horse a day and a half get back to that putrid swamp. I make the trip in half a day, just as the sun is lowering itself down between the western ridges of the mountains beyond Solitude. Not bad for a naked elf with a hunk of metal in her flesh.

By the time I get back to land I recognize, my skin is so hot that my feet turn every pool into a boiling lake. Like a stew pot under a massive flame. The unlucky mudcrabs nearby are left screaming and dying in my wake. Their shrill cries sound like spiteful witches shouting a final curse at me.

A trail of boiled mudcrabs. That'll make it real fucking difficult for Kreeves to follow me.

At first I don't realize the sun's gone down because everything around me is glowing purple. Like a magelight spell I never cast. Or, rather, like I cast a thousand magelights and stuck them all over my body like some kind of pubescent novice at the College of Winterhold who doesn't know a carrot from his dick.

I slow down some, not so sure I've gone the right way anymore. Might be I passed that shrub an hour ago. Everything smells like cooked crab. Am I making circling in my own massive swamp stew?

Around midnight I start to hallucinate.

The edges of my purple halo start to twist and weave. The ragged cloaks of strange creatures floating on the outskirts of my vision. Bony fingers. Purple eyes.

Eyes like mine.

"Narova..." the creatures whisper, voices like dust carried on a gentle wind. "Narova...come to us. Join us."

"Fuck yourselves," I grunt. Losing my footing and taking a knee inside of a puddle. It boils and evaporates just in time for me to drop my face into the warm, steaming mud.

"We can give you peace...." they whisper. "We can make the pain stop. All of the pain."

And right before I black out, I see one of them coming towards me. Except he's not wearing a cloak like the others. Just the outline of some twigs growing off his shoulders. A mantle of mud and branches.

Tattoos

Dreams and smoke and boiling water. Needles and flame. Pin pricks and ink all along her skin.

The needle looked like a tiny sword—so small a mouse could wield it—running drills along the flesh of her arms. And chest. And stomach.

It danced. Poking and prodding at the great scar Mordred gave her. Plus all the little ones Sujava and Kreeves and life in general threw into the mix before that.

Prick by prick, a new design was drawn along Narova Black Hair's battered body.

A heat that would never die. Burning out from her bones and filling the room with warmth. Piece by piece, the searing secret was drawn over. Covered and controlled. As if the tattoos were rewriting some bloody history and skipping over the dark deeds that had been done.

But blackness cannot be undone. Only hidden and ignored and forgotten.

Humming and wine and burning lavender. Red silk. Moss and dirt. The curl of sticks and twigs casting crooked shadows on the walls of a cabin built from pines. The room lit by a fire in the middle.

Time passed like a petulant child forced into the Temple of the Divines. Fidgeting one way and then the other—uncomfortable and sulky. Day and night, late afternoon. Morning for a moment, and then somewhere else. Always yearning for a different time. Restless to the core.

Narova woke up wrapped in silk. Black and smooth, just like her hair.

She could feel every slippery fiber of the cloth against her skin. Wound like a long skirt around her legs and then over each shoulder—crossing in the middle and covering her breasts. Coiled down each arm.

She sat up and frowned. Darted her eyes around the room.

Green eyes, now, instead of yellow. Still flecked with purple.

The room was empty except for the fire. Just embers and a final log that was close to dying out.

Slowly, she stood. Letting her body speak to her—tell her what had happened. She could feel the tattoos on her skin. The silk rubbed against the marked and unmarked skin differently. As unlike as a lover's caress and a stranger's. Although Narova couldn't tell whether the tattoos took the stranger's touch, or the lover's.

The heat was still inside of her—wreathed around her bones. But caged now. A beast waiting to be set free.

Outside, the swamp screamed. A million screeching insects and squawking animals vying for attention in the wild.

And one humming man. It sounded like he was about a hundred paces past the front door of the cabin.

Narova stepped forward and opened the door.

The smells were overpowering. A thousand smells. More, even. Mud, putrid water, rotting wood, wandering elk, prowling wolves, mushrooms, and shit. Each scent part of an unruly aroma that was The Swamp. And rising above all that fecundity was the unnatural, oily odor of the Dwarven machines.

Garland the Green sat cross legged in a clearing by the cabin. The sword across his knees. He was an ancient, gnarled thing. White teeth smiling at Narova amidst the suit of dirt and plants that encased the rest of his body.

"Narova. You returned." He did not seem surprised.

She took a few steps forward, enjoying the way the silk felt as she moved.

"What did you do to me?" she asked.

"Very little." His eyes moved to the left. "Her, on the other hand..."

Narova turned around to find a Dunmer leaning against the wall of the cabin. She wore a black tunic that was covered by a silk cloak—its ruby folds filling the ground around her. A thin silver sword hung at her hip. All at once a flood of lavender filled Narova's nose. Returning like a forgotten memory suddenly recalled.

"Who are you?" Narova asked.

Beyte, the Dunmer said, pushing herself gracefully away from the wall. "I saved your life."

"Might be you come to regret that," Narova said. "I'm bad news."

Beyte smiled. "We'll see. I didn't do it for free."

Narova shifted a bit in the silk, and became suddenly aware that she was the only member of this conversation without a weapon.

“Let’s start with how you did it,” Narova said. “Then we’ll get to the why.”

Beyte pursed her gray lips at that. “It’s difficult to explain in a way that you’ll understand.”

Narova just glared at her. Narrowing her green, otherworldly eyes at the Dunmer.

“Fine,” Beyte said, sucking in a breath and frowning a bit. “You could say that I...rewrote the story of your life. At least, the story that your soul knows.”

“You what now?”

“Edited, more than rewrote. Don’t worry, I left the good stuff. All the fucking and killing and rage is still there. I just put some polish on the parts that were causing your bones to burn.”

“And which parts were those, exactly?”

Beyte narrowed her eyes. “The ones that Akavarin wrote.”

Narova glanced at Garland, who was still sitting placidly on his rock. He nodded a little—almost imperceptibly. But Narova got the message. *She is telling you the truth.*

“The heat doesn’t feel gone.”

“It’s not,” Beyte said quickly. “Just altered a bit so that it can be controlled.”

“And you can do that—change a person’s soul with tattoos?”

Beyte nodded.

“How did you learn to do it?” Narova asked.

The Dunmer smiled. Then gracefully unhooked the clasp of her cloak. Unwound the sash on her tunic and pulled the cloth aside, revealing her dark skin and naked breast. The entire right side of her body was covered in an intricate tattoo—full of patterns and symbols and ink-drawn creatures. It looked like a story, almost. Starting at her collarbone and weaving its way down past the curve of hip. Out of sight.

“I had a good model,” Beyte said softly.

Narova hadn’t seen her own tattoo yet, but seeing Beyte’s send a tingling shudder prickling across her skin. Almost like the start of an orgasm.

“The markings can have rather...seductive effects,” Beyte said, smiling and licking her lips. Pink tongue forming a stark, beautiful contrast to her gray lips and skin. “You’ll get used to it.”

Narova felt her cheeks flush and a wetness form between her legs.

Seductive indeed, she thought. Then Narova shook her head, doing her best to cast the lustful feeling off, and pulled her eyes away from the half-naked Dunmer. "So what's next?" she asked, focusing on what looked like a pile of mudcrab shit about fifty paces away.

"As you demanded, that is the how," Beyte said, slowly pulling her tunic and cloak back into place. "Now for the why."

Narova turned back to her, feeling more in control of herself now that the tattoo was covered. She waited for Beyte to continue.

"I want you to tell me everything you can remember about what happened in Mzinchaleft."

Narova frowned. "Why?"

Beyte locked her burning red eyes on Narova. "Because my father and lover were in there with you, and I want them back."

"You're certain?" Beyte asked.

"No. That's what I've been telling you. Akavarin *tore my soul out* and flung my body into a pit. I had to crawl all the way down there and then squeeze my way back into my own corpse. Any idea what that feels like?"

Narova crossed her arms, shuddering a little at the feeling of the silk moving along her flesh. All of her senses were ignited and her whole body felt like a giant clit someone had been licking for half an hour.

"Not exactly," Beyte admitted.

"Well, it fucking hurt. And my head was a little cloudy when I finally got myself up into the antechamber. The purple water had already started to fill the cavern, but I remember seeing a headless body in Deadric Armor. Looked like someone had blown the head off."

"I don't believe it," Beyte said.

Garland the Green approached from behind and handed the Dunmer a small ceramic mug of tea. All three of them had gone back inside his sparse cabin to talk things over, and Garland had been unwavering about the need for everyone to have a cup of tea. Personally, Narova could have gone for a mug of ale. Or maybe an entire flagon. But tea would have to do.

"If you haven't heard anything from your father after so long," Garland said, "does it not make sense that he perished?"

Beyte shook her head. "I did not love my father, but you of all people should know that killing him would have been no simple thing. And anyway," she took a small sip of the tea, "I haven't heard from Willow, either. And he is most definitely alive."

"How can you be so sure?" Garland asked.

"If I cut your cock off, you'd be pretty sure about its departure, am I right?"

Garland just scowled at that. Beyte turned back to Narova.

"What happened then?"

Narova shrugged. "More water. A lot more. I figured I'd managed to scrape my soul up and jam it back down inside my body just in time to get drowned. But the water wouldn't touch me. It just kind of bubbled up around, hung me up in the middle. It was...what birth must be like." She didn't know how else to describe it.

"And the Geyser?"

Narova grunted. "If the water was like birth, that must be what it's like for a guy to blow his load all over a whore's face." She slid her eyes over to Garland.

"I couldn't speak to that sort of experience, I'm afraid." And he seemed truly sorry.

"You certainly have a way with words, Narova Black Hair," Beyte said. "And yet, I am not getting much value from them. You say my father is dead, which I do not believe—"

"All I said is that I saw a man with an exploded head wearing Deadric Armor. Don't know anything about dead wizards or the Nerevaruckus."

"*Nevevarine*," Beyte corrected.

"Whatever."

The Dunmer sighed. Took another sip of tea. "This has been less productive than I had hoped."

"You have no idea how deeply that upsets me," Narova said.

There was a long, awkward silence.

"Perhaps you should teach her to use it?" Garland said softly.

Beyte glared at him. "Perhaps you should stick to brewing tea and making clothes from swamp life. She is not...mature enough to handle the power."

“Look, grayskin,” Narova said, “You have about as good a grasp on my capabilities as a skeever does on spells of paralysis.”

“That so?” Beyte raised an eyebrow. “I know that you’ve fucked or killed a frightening majority of the people you’ve met in this world. I know that Astrid took you in because she needs someone as bloodthirsty as she is ambitious. And I know that Festus Krex trained you in Illusion and Alteration—both of which you have rather extraordinary skill with.”

She leaned in a little closer and whispered the next part.

“And I know that you can’t cast a spell right now any more than you can feel remorse for the nightmare of a person that you’ve become.”

Narova shifted a bit, uncomfortable at the accuracy of all those statements, especially the last one. Why had her magic not returned?

“Fair enough,” Narova said. “Bit more than a skeever, I suppose.”

“Much more.” Beyte sighed. “I suppose that it would be a waste of effort to give you the tattoos and then not teach you how to use them, though.”

She stood.

“First things first, we need to get you out of that silk and into something better suited for mayhem.”

“You’re doing it wrong,” Beyte said, crossing her arms.

“What’s the right way to stand hip-deep in a swamp and do magic?” Narova asked.

“The opposite of what you’re doing right now.”

Narova glared up at the Dunmer. “You’re just about the worst teacher I’ve ever had, you know. And I had a gangleader who made me suck his cock every time I botched a pickpocket try.”

“Trust me, I’m not putting anything of mine into your filthy mouth.”

Garland cleared his throat. “If we could focus on the task at hand?” he offered.

They were all waist-deep in the water. According to Beyte, the water made it easier, although she hadn’t said why.

“Fine. Watch me again.” Beyte uncrossed her arms and held them out. “It’s like...remembering someone’s face, but you’re remembering entire moments of your past. It *must* be clear in your

mind—as many details as you can summon. You close your eyes if that helps.” Beyte’s eyes disappeared behind gray lids. “Pick a specific symbol—or group of symbols—that I tattooed to your body, and bring the moment behind them into your mind’s eye. I’ll choose the first fox I ever killed.”

Immediately, the profile of a snow fox along her left shoulder began to trot in place—eye narrowed and ear perked. “The way he moved...smelled.” Beyte took a breath in through her nose. “And the way it felt to have my palm on his tiny chest when he died.”

The air around Beyte’s fist began to shimmer—the way a cobbled road does in the heat of summer. “Then you take that feeling—the power of the memory—and *use it*.”

Beyte’s fist shot forward like a crossbow bolt, and a blast of rippled air the size of a small stone erupted along the line of her arm—water flying up on either side of the shockwave. A gentle storm of putrid mist fell on the three of them.

“The power pulls from the dark places of our lives,” Beyte said, softer now. “Lust and rage. Anger and guilt. Hate.”

Her red eyes flicked over to Narova.

“Which makes me wonder why you’re having so much trouble figuring this out.”

Narova resisted the urge to brain the bitch on the spot.

“I’ll try again,” she said instead. Closing her eyes.

Lust and rage and anger and guilt, which to try? Rage. Let’s try rage.

“Speak it aloud,” Beyte reminded her.

“When I found out Festus was dead,” Narova whispered. “There were...trees. I was in the Pine Forest. Excited to almost be home—”

“Skip ahead.”

Narova frowned at Beyte’s harsh orders.

“You must find the height of the moment,” Garland said. Voice far more gentle. “When it overwhelmed you, and your veins were filled with venom instead of blood.”

Narova paused. Thought back.

“I went to Dead Man’s Drink. Placed smelled like piss and sawdust. The ale tasted about the same.”

She felt movement on her skin, just above her left shoulder. Like there was a bug or an insect trying to burrow into her skin.

“Good,” Garland whispered. “More.”

“That idiot Lod sitting next to me. Teeth all brown and rotting. I could smell his wretched lust rising as he talked about my tight cunny and his big cock.”

Narova gritted her teeth. More of her skin started to crawl. The tiny claws of her tattoos skittering down her forearm.

“And I thought about Festus, who was dead, and all the shitty people in the world who were still alive. And how much I wanted to knock Lod’s teeth down his throat and laugh at him while he died.”

Her skin ignited. A heat so scorching it made a blacksmith’s forge feel like a candle. Narova kept her eyes closed and thought of how good it felt to mash the pommel of her sword into that oaf’s face. She thought about all the soldiers she killed that day, too.

And things just got hotter.

There was a popping noise, and then deafened slice. A strange feeling below her waist. Then a mugginess to the air and a vague sizzling sound.

Narova opened her eyes.

The water they’d stood in was gone. Boiled away to nothing in the space of a heartbeat. Garland and Beyte were drenched, but whether it was sweat or water was hard to tell.

“That’s more like it,” Beyte said softly.

“How many of her tattoos did she use?” Garland asked. “I saw two...maybe three.”

“Three.” Beyte’s tone did not leave the door of argument open.

Narova looked down at her arm. There were over a hundred symbols drawn on her in one place or another. An entire arm and half her torso.

“What happens if I activated them all at once?” Narova asked.

Beyte smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Nothing that hasn’t happened before.”

Narova frowned. “The Geyser?”

The Dunmer nodded.

All three of them stared at each other for a few moments, weighing that thought.

“We need to leave this swamp,” Beyte said. “There are things in my father’s tower that I require.”

“Aye,” Garland scratched at a bit of dried mud on his neck. “It was feeling a bit cramped with you two here. I’ll be glad for some peace and—”

But he never got to finish his crotchety thought, because a spear erupted from his chest. The blue, mechanical blood of the Dwemer heart leaking out from him like honey spilled from a cracked jar. Garland’s smile faded some.

“Oh...” he mumbled. Then fell over in a wet, dead heap.

From the corner of her eye, Narova saw the flicker of a mud-wrapped tail.

The Argonian had found her.

Narova

Beyte moves fast, but Kreeves is faster. A mud serpent come from nowhere.

She manages to duck and dodge a few of the Argonian’s spear thrusts, but he whirls around when she’s off balance, cracking her in the temple with the shaft of his weapon. Her eyes turn a strange kind of white, and then she falls over.

I can’t tell if Beyte’s dead, but it’s clear she won’t be helping me out much.

Garland is dead for sure, though. His eyes are still open and there’s the last hint of a smile on his lips. But no life. The strange blue liquid that kept him alive and gave him all that power turns dark and thick in the mud.

I dig my eyes into that Argonian mountain of shit.

Kreeves takes a few steps to the left so he’s got good footing and space to move. He’s slathered from head to toe in swamp mud. I can’t smell him at all. Fuck, if he closed his eyes I might damn well lose sight of him.

But I am going to murder that lizard-fuck in the next two minutes.

“Killing that man is the worst mistake you ever made,” I say.

Kreeves shrugs. “If that’s true, killing Sujava was yours.”

He takes another step to the left. “But I didn’t figure you for someone with a stake in anyone’s life except your own.”

I smile then. An evil, twisted smile that sets my tattoos skittering and gets the reptile to finally show some hesitation. Some fear.

“You’re right,” I say quietly. “But Garland the Green is tattooed on my skin. And now I know how to move him.”

I feel the mud-clad swordsmen drawn on my third rib start to move—his blade slashing back and forth in the air.

Kreeves makes the smart choice and rushes me. Spear up and prepared for murder.

But as fast as he is—or was—he is not fast enough for me anymore.

I feel the air around my body shimmer and wave. I smell an acrid kind of burning as time bends right along with the air. Kreeves’ feet and body move in a slow, predictable way—his spearpoint inching its way towards me like a scared dog that’s afraid of getting slapped.

I step to the side and grab the shaft of the spear—just below the point—with my left hand as it passes by. Snap it off with my right elbow.

Flip it around and jam it into the lizard’s collarbone.

Then I pull all the rage and anger and fear I felt the first time I came to this swamp to kill Garland the Green. Pack it up into a writhing ball between both my fists and throw it at Kreeves.

The place he’s standing becomes such a cluster fuck of muddy destruction that I don’t see what happens to him—although the slippery bastard is quick as ever trying to dodge it.

Behind him, though, the trees and shrubs and pools of the swamp are demolished. Everything leveled to a flat kind of nothing as far as the swamp-fog lets me see. That isn’t very far, granted, but it’s far enough to know the damage is considerable.

There are some scales and blood strewn about the ruined ground in front of me.

Then there is the splintered end of a spear being jammed into my back.

I whip around on instinct and wind up crunching my elbow into Kreeves’ face. Feel his strange reptilian bone structure rearrange from the force of it.

Then we’re on the ground grappling. Punching and kicking and clawing at each other. He’s ripping at my hair and I’m pulling out scales hand-over-fist. Kreeves is snarling and trying to reach around and grab the splinter of wood in my back—figuring he can punch it a little further in, I assume. But he can’t get a grip with all the blood we’re suddenly covered in.

“Should have let me be, lizard,” I hiss into what seems like his ear. Although it’s mostly red pulp and broken scale now.

Then I head butt him and he goes limp just enough for me to get some momentum going behind my fist. I punch down on the spearpoint in his chest. Once, twice.

It's all the way inside. Halfway through his lung, I think.

I grab him by the tail and activate the tattoo of the first bum I killed by that limber mill—the pathetic bastard who wouldn't stop picking at his ear. Then I spin Kreeves around once and send him careening into the only tree within a mile of here that I haven't already knocked down.

The Argonian hits the tree square in the back with a crunch that sings of snapping vertebrae. Moans some.

I walk over nice and slow. My insides feel light and hollow—like all the weight's been sucked out of me. But Kreeves isn't going anywhere now. Some weakness should be all right.

"That other Grayskin that was with you," I say. "He's alive." It's not a question.

Kreeves wheezes and blinks a slow, dying man's blink.

"Yes," he says with a great deal of effort.

"Where is he?"

Silence.

"Give me answers and I'll kill you quick. Make me dig for them, and I'll pull you apart one piece at a time. Wear your head as a hat until they call me Narova Argonian-Head."

He blinks again. Considers that.

"I left him in Whiterun." His voice is full of struggle—hard and wet at the same time. Like damp stones clacking together on a creek bed. "At the inn... You weren't supposed to have any magic left."

"This isn't magic."

He nods at that, as if it's a fair explanation. "Now I understand why he wanted you dead. I should have been faster."

More silence.

"Any last words, Kreeves?"

He looks up at me. One eye entirely ruined, the other filled with blood. I'm not sure he can see me at all, given the damage.

"May the Hist torment you for eternity, as she will me."

I nod. As far as dying curses go, that one's pretty decent.

"You're the best I've ever fought," I say. "I'm doing this because I have to, not because I want to."

Then I take three steps forward—activate the tattooed ears on a horse I stole once—and twist Okan-Shei-Kreeves' head off with the energy.

I promised a quick death. Not a clean one.

The Aftermath

Beyte turned out to be alive. But the blow to her head courtesy of Kreeves screwed with her brains a bit. When she came to, she just kept muttering the same thing over and over again:

“The exploding head trick isn’t funny anymore. The door’s cracked open. Take me to Solitude and stop doing magic.”

Over and over again. Then she’d pass out for a few hours, wake up, and start the whole thing over again.

I figured she’d either gather her spilled sense on her own, or I’d get fed up with her mumbling and cut her head off.

Either one was fine with me.

I thought about leaving her there to mutter herself to death. The other Dunmer, Asriel, needed to go into the ground. But there was power in my tattoos that I’d just begun to understand. And if Beyte died, I wasn’t sure there was anyone left alive who could teach me the rest.

Sometimes you have to prioritize.

So I hiked out of the swamp and waited on the road until a merchant caravan came by. I killed them all, drug their bodies into a pool, and then took a horse back to pick up Ms. Mutterface. Carried her to the wagon like she was a sack of wheat, and then dumped her into the wagon.

It was a dull and unpleasant day. My life is bound to be cut short by one length of steel or another, but at least I won’t have spent it dicking around with wagons and horses any more than I had to.

I’d hoped to make it to Solitude in a day or two. That proved to be an almost laughably unrealistic goal.

Turns out there’s a big fucking harbor between Garland’s swamp and the Wolf City, and marshland isn’t exactly helpful if your goal is to drive a wagon in a straight line. I had to make a massive half-circle southwards before hooking around and taking the main highway into the city.

That stretch was dry and hot and bumpier than an Orc’s ass. I had two dozen wounds left unhealed from my fight with Kreeves, and each pothole or crack we hit managed to jostle a handful of them.

Miserable business.

Here’s something I’ve learned: Hermaeus Mora—the Daedric Prince of Fate—is an unpredictable cunt.

He'll watch you long for someone—burn for them so much you dig nail-shaped holes in your palms at night—and do nothing about it. Then, once you finally give up your hoping, fate drops them right in your path. As if his only goal was to watch you lose up.

That is how I found Arnbjorn again.

His warhammer showed up first—the silhouette of its handle growing like a sapling on one side of the road. And then him, huddled beneath it and wrapped in a patchy cloak. A shaggy, tired looking thing. But he stirred as I rolled past and there was no mistaking those ice blue eyes peering out from the shadows of his ragged hood.

The smell of the beast thick on him—a cloak he can never take off.

“Arnbjorn,” I said.

For a long stretch he didn't say anything back. I'm not sure why. Might have been he was feeling something similar to me—like fate had picked more or less the shittiest time possible for me to come rolling over that hill on my wagon.

Might have been he just didn't know who I was. Have to admit, I'd changed quite a bit since last we met.

“You're alive,” he said at last in that half whisper, half growl voice he has.

“So are you.”

“Stop doing magic!” Beyte hollered from the wagon.

That got Arnbjorn up and alert, but the Dunmer was passed out a second later. Breathing fast like a tired puppy.

“That's Beyte,” I said, then immediately wondered why. “We're heading to Solitude.”

He nodded, as if that was a good enough explanation for him.

“You been back to the Sanctuary?” I asked.

“Astrid cleared us out of the Pine Forest. Moved into a stronghold in the Rift with all that money we got from the Blackbloods.”

“A stronghold, huh?”

“More of a castle, really. You'd like it. I went back there, thinking maybe you'd do the same. But you never came...”

I let the reins drop from my hands and took a more careful look at him. His boots were worn down to nubs. Black dirt in his fingernails and half the landscape caught in his beard. A man that's done some walking lately, if I'd ever seen one.

"You been looking for me?"

"Aye," he nodded. "Just about given up on it, though. If I'm being honest."

I laughed. "Being honest is fool's work."

He grunted. Ran a dirty hand through a dirty beard. "I don't have a plan. Nothing specific to say, really. It just didn't sit right, carrying on without you. Not knowing for sure if you were alive or dead."

Silence.

Doubt.

The vague desire to jump down from that wagon and fuck him right there on the side of the road.

"Things have become...complex," I said instead.

He looked me up and down.

"Yeah." He sniffed once. "You don't smell the same."

"I don't think you ever told me what I smelled like before."

"Moss. And the bark from some strange kind of tree I've never seen." He smiled a little, although it was hard to see behind the mess of beard. "And sex. With you, there was always some sex."

"And now?"

More silence.

"It's still something I've never seen. But it's no tree."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing. Tongued a cut inside my mouth instead and regretted it right away. Fucking thing still hurt.

"Come with me the rest of the way," I said. It was one of those things that had been done before I had much of a chance to think it over. "It's not much further."

"Yes it is."

I'd have expected Arnbjorn to at least be conflicted about the decision, but there wasn't any doubt written his muddy face as he said his next words. "And I can't follow you, Narova. Gods," he looked down at the ground and then up at the sky and then back at me, "I'm not sure anyone can."

He swallowed once, heavy.

“But I can wait for you back with the others. There’s a place for you there when you’re done.”

I’m still trying to decide whether or not I should argue with him when he stands, heaves that colossal warhammer over one shoulder, and starts walking down the way I came, using my wagon track as a path.

And this time he’s the one that doesn’t look back.

After Morrowind went to shit, Divayth Fyr built his second tower in the mountains beyond Solitude.

Tel Fyr—his original sprawling island fortress on Vvardenfell—had been a living thing. The overgrown, enchanted mushrooms of the Telvanni forming a luxurious and ethereal structure. And yet, when the Red Mountain blew itself open and vomited lava over the landscape, Tel Fyr burned along with everything else.

The Great Wizard was dead, but his intent with the tower in Skyrim was clear to anyone with a half-decent pair of eyes: to be everlasting.

In place of soft mushrooms and graceful chambers, there was just a single indestructible spire. It rose four hundred feet in the air, molded into a perfect cylinder by the enigmatic means available only to a Dunmer who measured his life out in centuries instead of seasons.

The citizens of Solitude called it the God’s Spear.

Narova stopped the wagon a few hundred yards away from the tower and gazed upwards, her mouth hanging open against her will. It was hard not to be impressed.

Beyte woke from yet another temporary coma in the back of the wagon.

“Take me to Solitude and stop doing—”

Narova twisted around and punched the bitch square in the face. Beyte’s head knocked backwards, and blood started running from her left nostril and into her mouth.

“I’ve taken you to Solitude, you stupid cunt.” Narova massaged her fingers—more hurt from the days of travel than the cheap shot to Beyte’s face. “You going to rejoin the sensible folk of the world?”

Beyte stared at her for a handful of silent heartbeats. Opened her mouth, closed it again.

“The exploding head trick isn’t funny anymore!” she yelled.

Then passed out.

Narova did nothing. A hawk passed by overhead—its shadow looking like a miniature dragon roaming across the rocky ground.

“Fuck!” Narova yelled.

Neither Beyte nor the hawk responded.

It took the better part of an hour to haul Beyte’s comatose body up the overgrown path and into the base of the tower. For such an imposing structure, Narova found it surprisingly easy to pick the lock on the massive ebony door. It was as if Divayth had spent so much effort creating the spire, that the idea of a smart lock was so insignificant that it became superfluous.

And perhaps it was. Inside was a large, empty room and a shaft that rose upwards into the darkness. No stairs. No doors. Nothing.

Narova cursed again, then dragged Beyte to the center of the room. Slapped her once. Twice. Three times.

The Dunmer woke up with a gasp.

“Mention a syllable about exploding heads, magic, or Solitude,” Narova hissed. “And I will kill you in this room.”

Beyte’s eyes kept that milky-red glaze of stupidity, but a purple mist gathered around them—leaking its way from the floor and walls.

“The fuck?” Narova looked around, eyes narrowed.

And then they were rocketing upwards, as if Vivec himself had flicked them with an enormous finger.

A few moments of weightlessness, and then Narova and Beyte crashed in a heap on the floor of the upper levels of Divayth Fyr’s tower.

Narova skimmed the room—old thief instincts kicking in. There were shelves and shelves of books with expensive bindings. Glass cabinets filled with blue and red and yellow potions. Two state of the art enchanting stations. Soul gems everywhere. Chests. Safes. Weapon racks.

The place must have been worth 100,000 Septims. More, maybe.

Narova grabbed Beyte by the throat and drug her over to a chair made of molded wicker. Slapped her until she opened her eyes.

“This is it, Beyte,” Narova said. “My patience is all burned up.”

Narova watched the Dunmer’s hazy red eye wander around the room. Drifting. Lost.

Then the walls shuddered—as if the entire place was alive, and had been holding its breath the entire time—and a wind came from nowhere.

“The door opens,” the wind whispered. “And the Bosmer walks through.”

Beyte’s eye turned a burning shade of crimson. The murky pupil finally making an appearance in that sea of red. She looked around for a few moments, and then her face screwed itself into her familiar frown.

“Narova Black Hair,” she said. “We have much to do.”

Loose Ends

Narova Black Hair walked out of the Wizard's Tower two months after dragging Beyte's unconscious corpse inside of it. Her body was wreathed in silk—dozens of jet black bandages bound around her limbs and across her chest. The fabric—and the tattoos covering her skin—helped keep the heat inside of her body contained.

But it was the months of training with Beyte that kept the power inside of her under control.

She was going to kill Asriel.

This revenging would be a bitch without her magic, but it wasn't like she had a choice. That gray-skinned fuck was the whole reason she couldn't do magic in the first place.

Narova hired a carriage to Whiterun. She tracked the Dunmer charmer from there to Riften. That cesspool of a city was swelling with information, if you knew who to pay. Narova's old guild ties weren't severed yet, and it wasn't hard to find an open hand.

Apparently, Asriel had taken a ship to the Summerset Isles. Thrown in with some Khajiit merchants who had grown tired of the miserable cold and the racist Nords.

That's what Brynjolf had told her, anyway. And it only cost her fifteen Septims and a flash of her tits from between the bolts of black silk.

Narova didn't mind. She'd always thought Brynjolf was cute.

Narova followed Asriel as a stowaway aboard the Thalmor frigate, *The Burned Tree*. Spent the entire trip sneaking around the cargo holds, munching on goat cheese and sucking back as much wine as she could fit inside of her. Gods knew there was enough to go around.

When they reached port at Sunhold, Narova snuck into town and stole a set of expensive robes and perfumed oils from a clothing shop near the dock. Then she emptied the shop's lockbox and hopped out a window that opened into a cobblestone alley.

The air was warm and sticky—like walking through a soup. Narova threw the stolen raiment over her patchwork silk bandages and rubbed the oils into her hair. It didn't quite hide the smell of the cargo hold, but it was better than nothing.

Then she wandered out into the strange city.

The shops and homes were nothing like the buildings of Skyrim, which carried such a permanent feeling among their heavy stone slabs. The Altmer seemed to have built their entire world from fragile wood—everything was graceful and vivid and delicate.

These people had never seen fires on their hills. Never heard the war cries of their enemies in the night.

Narova didn't know whether to envy them or pity them.

Asriel was almost as easy track down in Sunhold as he had been in Riften. A gray-skinned face stands out among the golden Altmer. Narova used the stolen gold to bribe a fishmonger, a carriage pilot, and an apprentice mage for information.

They all told her the same thing:

The Dunmer had stayed a week in Sunhold and then traveled east along the shore to a city called Dusk. It was a three day's ride along the coastal road. Narova made the journey on foot, hoping she'd run into a merchant caravan heading the opposite way she could get information from.

No such luck.

Instead, she padded into the unwalled city an hour after midnight and found a good vantage point halfway up a tower built from cedars and white stucco. She could see every avenue and half the alleyways in Dusk from there.

Now she just had to find a gray face amidst that sea of gold, which took about fifteen minutes after the sun rose the following day.

Asriel had rented a large set of apartments that overlooked the small cove. Nothing but windows on the eastern wall. Narova watched him for two days from those rooftops, making sure he wasn't baiting her into a trap.

He spent his entire day in a coffeehouse three blocks away from his rented rooms. The Dunmer ordered a large ceramic pot of coffee each morning, and passed the hours by transferring the steaming beverage into a small mug and taking small, dainty sips like a bitchy princess.

He took meetings with several different people both days. Narova couldn't get close enough to eavesdrop on their business, but they were all Altmer with the imperious look of low-ranking bureaucrats plastered on their faces. Happy cogs in a system that was so much larger than themselves, they were fooled into believing they spun in the center of it.

Between the meetings, Asriel leafed through a small book of riddles and worked subtle charms on the pretty Altmer that managed the coffeehouse.

Narova figured he'd only need one more day at the coffeehouse to take her to bed, so at three o'clock in morning on the second night she snuck into Asriel's apartments.

If you could call it sneaking, anyway. The idiot left the windows open.

She unwrapped one bandage from her right arm—about three yards worth of fabric—and balled it into her left fist. Then she held her right hand overtop the Dunmer's sleeping chest and activated a tattoo by thinking of the first time she'd ridden one of the migratory trees of Vallenwood, when she'd just been a simple huntress.

Not a thief or assassin or mage or...whatever she was now.

The air above Asriel's chest rippled. Then his liver exploded from his abdomen, the bloody organ flying into Narova's open hand.

Asriel's red eyes popped open—along with his mouth—but Narova stuffed it with the entire silk bandage in her left hand before he managed to eke out a proper scream. All he got out was a muffled kind of terror.

"Liver looks much better," Narova said, turning it over to inspect it. "It's simply amazing what healers can do these days, isn't it?"

Asriel's clutched the gaping hole in his chest. It took both hands to cover the wound.

"Holding in the rest won't do you much good. I've taken the good parts." Narova jiggled the liver once, then tossed it over her shoulder. She got the tattoo of a cloud-filled night to shimmer a bit on her collarbone, and used the energy to pin Asriel down by his wrists and ankles.

Then Narova bent down so she was eye-level with Asriel. He kept moaning but his eyes followed here. He hadn't gone into shock yet.

"You're going to die in the next five minutes, Dunmer," she said quietly.

More moaning.

"You don't get final words," Narova continued. "No insults or spiteful curses on my soul. Kreeves earned his last words, but all you get is this painful, anti-climactic death."

He struggled against the power of Narova's perfectly controlled bonds. Didn't get anywhere.

"You caused me a great inconvenience, Asriel. I wonder why you did it—and why you left that magical block up after you fled Skyrim..." she trailed off, looked at his panic-filled eyes and saw him trying to plead through them.

She felt him trying to work his Charms on her, too. Those wouldn't work.

"But I don't care enough to take that silk out of your mouth and ask you. I want your life to end with the taste of my sweat in your mouth. Now fuck off and die."

A few more muffled moan later, and he obeyed.

Narova stood, lifted her arms over her head and stretched her back. Craned her neck to the left so it cracked. Then to the right.

Then she took a deep breath and cast the familiar shroud of invisibility on herself.

Getting back to Skyrim was going to be a bitch, but at least she wouldn't have to hide in a cargo hold this time.

END.

Thanks for reading. If you have any questions, comment, or feedback, send them to me at Fargoth@ShortFantasy.com. I'd love to hear from you.