

THE OFFICIAL NOVELIZATION OF THE BRAND NEW GAME

GOD OF WAR



J. M. BARLOG

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WRITTEN BY
J. M. BARLOG

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GOD OF WAR

THE OFFICIAL NOVELIZATION

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J. M. BARLOG

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FOREWORD

Being a parent sucks. And yet being a parent is so totally amazing. The struggles and uncertainty are constant, while the rewards seem to be spread very far apart. While those highs may be few and far between, they are so incredibly potent that they tend to carry you easily to the next high.

I also think the creative process is a lot like being a parent. You go into it with all the enthusiasm and passion of a person who clearly has no fucking clue what is in store for them. Very quickly the reality of the situation settles in and the marathon stretch of emotional turbulence and sleep deprivation kicks your butt so hard your forehead is stamped with Adidas. After what seems like an eternity of total confusion, surprise punches to the face, and a little voice in your head that gleefully reminds you that you have no earthly clue what you are doing, you get a single euphoric moment of clarity. You cling to that moment like it's a life raft and you are stranded in a vast empty ocean blanketed by a permanent starless night. In a way it is the thing that is going to save you, because those moments of certainty don't last very long. Pretty soon the sharks of doubt and fear start circling below the murky water, brushing against your naked legs and scaring the ever-loving shit out of you. It might seem a bit melodramatic, but trust me; when you are treading water in the middle of a dilemma whose answer simply will not present itself—it feels like freaking sharks preparing to eat you from the toes up.

Over the many years of your journey you collect the good and the bad moments. If you are lucky it is far more of the good than the bad, but no matter the final count, it always seems to feel like you have more bad. As the years advance, something amazing happens, the black of night gives

way to the gentle twinkle of the stars. Then, as if by some kind of dark unknown magic, the horizon ignites with the white-hot burst of the coming sun. Suddenly, you can see things a whole lot clearer. You're still clinging to a tiny life raft in the middle of an endless ocean. But, hey, at least it's not dark anymore.

It's the little victories—in life, and in the creative process.

One of the conceits of the creative and the parental journey is in knowing that you don't know. This is a lesson I found the hardest to learn in my life. It is so incredibly hard to say, "I don't know." Especially when another person looks to you for answers. The real tragedy of this lesson is that, as a parent, you struggle with trying to project to your child that you have it under control. You are the stabilizing force for them. You are the rock. But deep inside, you're just as uncertain of the future as your child is. It is not until you are placed in the situation where you must project a confidence in the unknown that you truly realize that we all have no idea what we are doing. But knowing is, in some ways, overrated. It's not about knowing how everything is going to turn out, but being open to every moment as it comes, and working together to discover those little victories. It is about being willing to cede control, as much as take charge, to see each other for who you are at that moment, rather than who you think you should be in the future.

Because along the path of life and parenting—as well as the process of creating—it is not about the destination; and it really helps to understand that you are not doing it alone. I could never have made it here without my father. I am every bit of who I am because of our journey. Now I begin this wandering with my own son, armed with the lifetime of lessons from both my father and my mother to guide me on this road. The most important of all these lessons: I know that I don't know.

The adventure that Kratos and Atreus go on in this story was inspired so much by my own life and the lives of those who worked so hard to create it. If you look close enough, you might even be surprised to see a bit of your own journey reflected back at you in these pages.

Cory Barlog





CHAPTER 1

Atreus shut his left eye, easing the bow down until the arrow tip aligned with the sixteen-point tawny stag's shoulder. He steadied a quivering arm while narrowing his concentration on his prey.

One shot. He would get it in one shot.

Inhale, focus, exhale, release. The words drummed through his brain with a cadence that pounded like the blood vessels in his forehead. His heart raced so fast it fractured his focus, forcing him to reset and draw another breath before he might be able to release the feathered shaft.

He had to do this. He had to show his father he could do this. An avalanche of debilitating doubts stomped helter-skelter through his mind. What if he failed?

Atreus shifted his right arm slightly left. The stag continued grazing, still ignorant of their clandestine presence. They had strategically crouched upwind. *Fire only when the animal is looking down*, he recalled from his mother's training.

"Feel your heartbeat. Slow it down. Time your release between the beats," a stern, gruff voice came again, this time right beside his ear.

Despite his surging heart, Atreus focused just behind the shoulder. If his aim held true, his shot would find the beast's heart. Despite the brittle air, a trickle of sweat found its way into his eye. He was running out of opportunity. The stag's head started up.

Atreus' eyes closed without him realizing it.

"Hold," Kratos issued like a command.

Atreus released, praying the gods were watching over him.

The pine shaft sailed wide, lofted left by an unaccounted-for puff of wind. It found an elm's bole nearby, sending the startled deer into flight.

“What are you doing!” Kratos exploded, steely gray eyes on fire, ashen skin as white as the clouds. Scarlet tattoos swirled across his torso as if the result of a hand’s wide brushstroke. A similar tattoo, running over his hairless head and crossing his left brow, furled with anger as he ripped the bow from his son’s limp hands. A three-tiered leather pauldron strapped across his chest protected his right shoulder. Other than that, his torso remained unclothed, save for the discolored bandages covering both forearms.

“Now its guard is up! Only fire—” Kratos stammered through his thick, trimmed chestnut beard. Then he forced himself to stop. He needed to check his anger. He was dealing with a child. “Only fire when I tell you to fire.” He issued a low growl.

“I’m sorry...” Atreus said reflexively. His innocent blue eyes, the hue of the deep lakes dotting the land, pleaded forgiveness, though he could not fathom why his failure so angered his father. His mother always encouraged him when he missed during their hunting lessons. She was eternally forgiving compared to his father. He never felt the need to choke out an apology for his shortcomings with her. It seemed all he ever did was apologize to his father for his errors. And his mother never revealed even the slightest hint of anger toward him.

“Do not be sorry! Be better. Now find it.”

Atreus reached for his bow; Kratos jerked it further away.

“You missed your mark, boy,” his father muttered. He launched himself from the cover of dense foliage to the path the deer had taken. “We are supposed to be hunting deer, not chasing them. Now we must run it down to finish the job.”

The razor-sharp words clawed at Atreus’ insides. He stood chest-high before his father in a rabbit-skinned sleeveless jerkin to stave off the chill in the breeze. He tried to understand why his father would act so harshly toward him. He tried to accept it. He tempered his rage. It was almost as though the man before him, his father, was a stranger. Shaking the thought away, he raced off in pursuit of the creature. He hoped it would take but a few moments to spot the fleeing animal’s tracks in the sparsely covered earth.

His tenuous confidence shattered, his heart racing, and his mind reeling, Atreus accelerated his pace as fast as his skinny adolescent legs could carry him. Sweat dappled his cropped chestnut hair. Kratos loomed a dozen long

strides ahead, picking his way into the forest to locate the animal's trail. Now was no time to talk, no time to think, no time to reflect on his error. Now was a time for action, as his mother had instructed him. If he wanted to eat, he had to locate the tracks and take up the chase.

"This way," he called out jubilantly.

Kratos had unknowingly drifted far left of the animal's path.

"Your mother taught you well," Kratos fired back through heaving breaths, as he pounded the forest floor beside his son to follow the now discernible trail.

Approaching a slight, pine-infested ridge, Atreus froze. He spied the stag in a thorny copse, grazing on the sparse grass jutting out every which way through mounds of dirt-speckled snow.

Atreus lowered himself onto one knee, waiting while his father eased in to return the bow.

"This time, wait for my mark. Relax. You must not think of it as an animal," Kratos instructed gruffly.

Kratos laid the bow across his son's hands, all the time eyeing their prey. "It is simply a target. Clear your mind."

The words were unwelcome and unneeded. Atreus knew what he had to do. He had learned to shoot from his mother. She was more than just an able teacher.

Atreus leveled the bow before notching in his arrow.

"Keep that elbow up."

"I can do this," Atreus whispered, more to himself than to his father.

"Draw to your chin," the God of War instructed.

Atreus eased the bowstring back.

"Concentrate on your target. See nothing else."

The stag lifted its head, sampling the air.

Having planted themselves upwind, they remained undetected as long as the prevailing breeze did not shift and betray them.

"Inhale, concentrate, exhale, release," Kratos' stern voice drummed out.

Atreus ignored the words. He paused, his own anger rising to meddle with his concentration. He cast everything aside except the target before him.

"It is merely a target," Kratos said, interrupting the boy's concentration.

Atreus felt his wavering arm drift upward. He commanded it to be still. He was off target. He began the painstakingly slow task of correcting his

aim ever so gently to return the arrow tip to its mark.

“Take the shot, boy. Now!” Kratos urged, impatience riding his words.

Silently the arrow arced true to its target. It penetrated the rear of the stag’s shoulder. The beast lurched skyward before pounding into the forest in a hobbling flight directly away from their location.

“I got it!” Atreus chimed. He lurched to his feet in triumph.

“Good,” Kratos said, still restrained. The boy had failed to drop the beast where it stood. Now they had to chase it down again.

Atreus wanted to smile, wanted to celebrate his accomplishment before his demanding father.

But instead, he needed to focus on locating the beast before it could flee too far. All was not lost, as long as he could keep on the beast’s trail and reach it before it might locate a safe refuge.

Atreus scrambled to take up the chase. The blood trail made his task obvious.

Before the deer could scamper beyond sight, they witnessed the beast’s forelegs faltering. “He’ll not run far, Father,” Atreus called over his shoulder, his excited smile spreading across his face.

Kratos followed a dozen anxious strides in his wake.

Atreus paused, but only long enough to confirm he maintained the blood trail. “This way,” he instructed his father, angling his bow in the direction to follow.

Atreus stopped suddenly at the fringe of a leafy copse. His feet remained rooted as Kratos approached a few seconds later.

The deer had fallen, blood oozing from the shaft still buried in its shoulder. Terrified, it stared up at the lad, who now stood over his accomplishment. Suddenly, it failed to feel like such an accomplishment.

“It’s... it’s still alive,” Atreus muttered with a breathless voice.

He worked to swallow the rush of emotion flooding into his throat. He turned away rather than gaze directly at the suffering animal.

Kratos read the struggle on his son’s face, his expression exactly like his mother’s: caring, soulful, and compassionate.

Atreus knew what came next.

“Your knife.” Kratos’ voice was one of an emotionless, seasoned hunter. Atreus withdrew the blade, unconsciously offering it to his father.

Kratos planted his hands on his hips, waiting, unmoving. The God of War’s thin, tight lips remained a straight line through his overgrown beard.

He leveled a stare at Atreus.

“No. You must finish what you started,” Kratos commanded. The lad must accept the harsh realities of his life. A forceful nod indicated the deer, still chaotically breathing in the clearing; its bleeding, however, a mere trickle while it awaited death. Until that final breath, it would suffer from the excruciating pain caused by the arrow buried in its shoulder.

Atreus reluctantly pulled his gaze back from his father to the now quivering animal.

Disbelief held him motionless. He knew what was expected of him. He understood why he had to deliver the deathblow, yet something inside held his brain in check.

Drawing in a deep calming breath, Atreus dropped to his knees before the creature. He shoved the knife forward. His hand trembled out of control.

“I can’t...” he pleaded.

Kratos crouched beside him and wrapped his monstrous hand over the boy’s fingers, clutching the knife, steadying the blade. Atreus flinched at the sudden, uncharacteristic contact. His father rarely made any physical connection with him. Part of Atreus wanted to bask in that moment; another part commanded he respond with the appropriate action, so as not to appear weak. In his heart he knew why he felt the way he felt. His life was to be forever changed.

Misinterpreting his father’s act, Atreus relaxed, grateful in that moment that he would be released from having to deliver the fatal blow.

“Delaying what must be done only invites trouble,” Kratos said.

In the next moment, with Atreus’ hand still in place, Kratos shoved the blade full force into the stag’s neck, ending its life with a final shrill screech and a spurt of blood splattering their faces.

For seconds—too many seconds, it seemed—they stared at the stag’s lifeless form. Its sole purpose in living was to sustain them in their lives; it died so they might live on. Their lives mattered more than the lives of the creatures they killed. Atreus needed to understand that. That was the way of their world, and the boy had to accept it.

The dense undergrowth a dozen paces to their left rustled violently.

Fear swarmed across Atreus’ face. Something monstrous was invading.

Remaining calm, but bracing for the worst, Kratos shot to his feet, lurching the unmoving boy up by the collar and shoving the lad behind him.

A hulking gray hand slammed over a nearby ridge, reaching for the carcass. The woodland troll, three times Kratos' height and easily four times his girth, lumbered into the clearing. Its gaping mouth, framed by two curved defensive tusks, opened in preparation for gnawing into the stag. Having caught the scent of deer blood, the creature had decided it had found something to sustain itself.

“What is that?” Atreus called out.

“Woodland troll. Stay behind me,” Kratos commanded.

Kratos started to back Atreus to safety when the troll lunged for them, slamming a massive fist into the God of War's chest, while simultaneously lifting the limp deer with its other hand.

The attack sent Kratos and the boy tumbling into a hollow in the trees.