

The Ballad of Udaur

By: Alejandro Serrano

The shimmering water of Lake Aydras reflected the brilliance of the morning sun in a splendor Arctorus had rarely seen before. The waters radiance was rivaled only by the glory of the city. Udaur, the elven capital. The head of Elfdom in Aydras. Along the pier Arctorus saw the floating white vessels the elves carved from pine and oak. So slender and majestic. They looked like swans swimming on the calm waters of the lake.

Arctorus felt blessed to be witnessing such a sight. A horn blew in the distance marking the passing of another hour. Not a horn like any he was used to. This was a horn carved from the bones of a Labras. The blue birds common along the lake's vast shores.

"I suppose that's our queue," Vinkter, Arcotrus's lifelong friend said. Arctorus smiled and nodded. A breeze blew past him and rustled his hair and beard almost like a lover's caress.

"You know this is wrong, don't you?" Vinkter said. "Wrong in more ways than just one."

"Aye," Arctorus replied. "Ti's wrong, but I'll not have it any other way." Vinkter smiled. "I never thought you'd be the type of fool who falls in love, Arctorus." Arctorus laughed.

"I never thought to be a fool. Perhaps I've spent far too much time around you and your kin." Vinkter laughed in reply and patted his friends' shoulder. "Let's get home, Arctorus. The journey is long." Together they walked away from the pier and towards the city center.

It was nearly noon and the elves would soon gather to praise the sun god when the sun was highest in the sky.

As they walked Arctorus thought of the see'er he'd visited before making the journey south to meet the elves. His lord had asked Arctorus to make the journey in search of hope. The winter in Thress had been difficult, and the Jarls had battled for most of the spring and summer. Food was scarce, disease was rampant, and his people found themselves in need of the elve's generosity. Yet, despite all of that, Arctorus was willing to risk the elven king's displeasure.

What they planned was difficult. It was no simple thing to escape the elven capital with the king's daughter in tow. Yet destiny is a curious thing. He remembered their arrival in Udaur less than a fortnight past. How the harsh storms in the midst of the vast lake had nearly sunk their vessel and ruined most of their drinking water and food supplies. The glory of the shimmering elven city as the morning sun rose and its rays reflected off the exquisite craftsmanship of the elven towers and palisades. Yet, all that splendor paled in comparison to the moment Arctorus first laid eyes upon the princess.

Her beauty was almost incomprehensible to him. How could such a creature walk the same harsh world he was so accustomed to. Arctorus had looked upon her and his life had changed in an instant. Even more wonderous was the fact that she too had been stricken by him. The moment their eyes met for the first time was burned into Arctorus's soul. His heart fluttered and he smiled at the memory.

Arctorus looked back towards the water to ensure their ship was in position. A small brown vessel sticking out like an imperfection on an otherwise perfect landscape.

Human boats were nowhere near as advance as the elves. Nor as large or agile on the shifting tides, but Arctorus had built the *Nordman* himself using old timber from his childhood home and the surrounding forests of Thress. He smiled as he saw the men aboard shuffling about eager for their arrival.

Arctorus whispered a silent prayer for their venture. To both Gexzu, the god of men, and all the elven deities. "We'll need all the help we can get," Arctorus thought as he and Vinkter made their way through the elven crowds and towards the spiraling white towers of Udaur's palace. The two silver garbed guards at the palace gate allowed them through without suspicion.

After all they were serving as emissaries for their lord in Grenlef. Why would the elves ever think to doubt their intentions? Like honored guests they moved through the shimmering halls of the elven king. Arctorus once more marveled at the craftsmanship of the elves. The stones and precious metals contained on their walls all shimmered like stars in the night sky.

They entered a large courtyard shaped in the form of a crescent moon. At either end Arctorus saw the royal trees. Two large pines covered with silver needles that stood nearly a

hundred feet tall. The elves had planted them centuries earlier but Arctorus was not completely sure what they're significance was.

As they neared the opposite end of the court yard they stopped dead in their tracks as the elven king, Threndal, emerged from his hall. His gaze, as always, was stern but kind. He stood nearly a foot taller than most elves Arctorus had met and was one of the most beloved kings the elves had ever elected.

“Young Vinkter and Arctorus,” the king said with his melodic voice. “Always a pleasure to see you.” The two men bowed. “Majesty,” Arctorus said, cordially. Just then another horn blow filled the air. “It seems we are called to praise,” the king said. “Will I see you before you depart?” “Of course, Majesty,” Arctorus lied.

The king nodded and stepped past the men. Vinkter gave Arctorus an uneasy glance. “I know,” Arctorus mouthed. They waited for the king to leave through the other end of the crescent courtyard before continuing. They were careful not to appear too rushed so as to not arouse suspicion.

The elves who passed them all nodded a short greeting as they made their way towards the center of the city for the noon prayer. Finally, Arctorus and Vinkter climbed to the top of the central royal tower and entered through an unlocked ebony door.

Vinkter locked the door behind them while Arctorus ran forward enthusiastically. On the balcony he found the one he'd been so eager to see. Fiodora. The elven princess stood gazing

out over the city. Her red hair blew softly in the breeze and the sight of her made Arctorus's heart skip several beats.

"My Darling," he said as he took her in his arms and embraced her, but Fiodora did not respond in kind. "Princess?" Arctorus asked nervously as he saw that her gaze was distant and afraid. "What is it?" Arctorus asked gently just as Vinkter joined them.

Fiodora turned her eyes and met Arctorus's gaze. "We cannot leave," she whispered almost holding back tears. Arctorus took her face in his rough hands and looked at her with concern. "What has happened?"

Fiodora's eyes glistened with tears as she spoke. "The gods." Her response unnerved him, but Arctorus did not understand. "Wha..." before he could speak, he felt Vinkter's hand on his shoulder. "Arctorus look," he said softly. Following his comrades gaze Arctorus saw, for the first time, a sight that chilled his blood. The water of Lake Aydras had receded. Not like a tide shift but rather drained. Gone. The elven ships and the *Nordman* sat on the lake bed where all the water had seemed to suddenly disappear. "Gods..." he whispered. "What is this?"

Arctorus led Vinkter and Fiodora back through the city and towards the docks. Most of the elves had not noticed the occurrence since they were busy with their noon prayer. As

they approached the docks Arctorus held Fiodora's hand in his own and cursed all the gods above for the situation. Where they really so cruel that they would empty the lake just to prevent the union of a man and elf maiden?

A half mile from the edge of the docks Arctorus could see his companions aboard the *Nordman*. They were surrounded by all manner of fish and lake life. Vinkter too was gazing at the scene when he whispered something to himself and jumped down to the muddy bottom of the lake and ran forward. Arctorus held Fiodora close to him, no longer caring who saw them.

"What is he doing?" he wondered as he watched Vinkter stop and crouch down next to a large fish. Only it wasn't a fish. As Arctorus adjusted his vision he saw that the figure that looked like a large fish had the torso and body of a human woman. "Is that" he began, just as Fiodora finished the sentence for him. "A mermaid. They live somewhere in the far depths of the lake. I've only seen them surface near the docks on rare occasions."

Arctorus felt his jaw drop. "A mermaid?" He would have thought it impossible, but his attention remained focused on figuring out how he would escape the city with Fiodora.

Vinkter returned to them carrying the mermaid in his arms. The men aboard Arctorus's ship had begun to jump down onto the lake bed and were making their way back towards the docks. When Vinkter reached them Arctorus helped him haul the mermaid up. The

creature looked beautiful and majestic. More like an elf than a human. The strange creature had its eyes closed and was muttering something unintelligible.

Fiodora leaned down and placed her ear to the mermaid's mouth just as the crew of men reached the docks and began hoisting themselves up. "Guess we won't be leavin," Sacron, one of Arctorus's sailors informed him. Arctorus shook his head and looked down at his darling Fiodora. "What is it saying?"

Fiodora looked up at the men with a deep fear in her gaze. "Run." Arctorus was about to ask what that could possibly mean, but something at the far end of the lake caught his attention before he could. A quick shimmer. The light of the noon sun reflecting on the water's surface. As he turned to look, he understood, for the first time in his life, what fear truly meant.

A wall of water. A tidal wave a half mile tall or taller was stampeding towards the city. Arctorus understood now the lake waters sudden disappearance. The water had been pulled back by the massive force of the tidal wave. Without thinking Arctorus reached down for Fiodora and shouted at the rest of his men. "Run!"

Above them the gulls and birds all flew in the opposite direction trying to flee the coming destruction. A low hum filled Arctorus's ears as they made their way through Udaur seeking the safety of higher ground. As they passed the congregation of elves in the center of the white, shimmering, city Fiodora screamed at her kinsfolk. "Run!"

The low humming suddenly became a roar in Arctorus's ears as the wall of water moved closer. The elves all screamed and began running for their lives as they too saw their destruction approaching.

"We'll never out run this! Vinkter shouted. "The palace towers!" Fiodora said. "Their stone foundation maybe able to support the impact." Without another word they ran with all haste in the direction they had just come.

Nearly at the palace gates Arctorus looked back and saw that the tidal wave was now close enough to begin its destruction. He saw the white elven ships as well as his own break apart and shatter into thousands of pieces as the water crushed them. He looked up at the spiraling staircase and he felt a sudden dread as he realized. "We'll never make it."

The blind panic of the elves drove a wedge through them and Arctorus reached out to grab a hold of Vinkter, but the last he saw of him he was being driven into an alley by the running elves. "No!" Arctorus shouted, and nearly ran after him, but Fiodora seized his arms and shouted. "You won't make it! Arctorus run!"

But just before the water could reach the city it stopped as if hitting an invisible wall. There, at the edge of Udaur's docks Arctorus saw the elven king, Threndal. Shining in all his splendor and using the magic of the goddess Zagrioria to stop the waters advance.

“Go!” Arctorus said to Fiodora, and they hurried up the royal staircase. Even through the thick stone walls the roaring and fury of the water was audible. As they entered Fiodora’s chamber the elf maiden looked pale with fear.

“My father stopped it!” she managed to say between breaths. Arctorus allowed himself a moment to breath, but he wasn’t so sure Fiodora was right. He walked towards the balcony and took in a sight he never would have imagined.

The shimmering elven city stood just before the giant wall of water as if frozen in time. Threndal, stood with his arms held high holding the water back, and just above the crest of the foaming water Arctorus saw what he had feared. A larger second wave was coming.

It was nearly upon them, and he knew Threndal could do little about it. The second wave towered over the first like a father over a small child. Fiodora stood beside him and she took his hand in hers. “Dying by your side is a far better fate, than facing the long ages of this world alone.” Arctorus turned to meet her eyes and smiled. “I only regret that I could not defend you from this fate.”

High above them an eagle cried out. Arctorus looked up and recognized it immediately. “Tell them all what happened here!” he shouted up at the Thressian eagle. The lone bird cried out again mournfully.

The larger wave crashed into the first and the mighty elven king Threndal was lost into the rumbling fury of the water. Udaur was lost. Arctorus saw the shining city's destruction and turned to the one he loved. Her eyes were wide with fear and horror.

"Look at me," Arctorus told her, caressing her face with his callused hands. Fiodora turned and they became lost in each other's gaze. Arctorus pulled her closer as the roaring of the water became deafening. The light of the sun grew dim, and the world faded away. He kissed Fiodora and clung to her tightly just as the waters of Lake Aydras consumed them and the heart of elfdom in one savage stroke.

High in the sky, a mourning eagle cried out into the sky once more.