

The Immortal Tales

Tarlos

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1. Unwelcome Arrival

Kilana, the densest, most overgrown forest in Kri and its surrounding regions. The trees grow tall as mountains, and thick enough to supply wood for a small village for several weeks. It is within this mass of trees and scrub that Arkeus had fled after abandoning his fellow vampires in Kryall.

He struggled through the brush, pushing away massive ferns and woody weeds as he progressed deeper and deeper into the murky darkness. The soil beneath his feet sunk with each step, the moisture in the air forming small beads over his face and running down his body, soaking his clothes.

A snapping twig broke the silence, not by him, but high up in the trees. He froze and turned to where the sky should have been, draped heavily in the canopy of the massive pillars rising around him. A moment passed, and a small bird emerged from the leaves, beating its wings relentlessly and disappearing into the branches beyond.

Arkeus breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to the task at hand, forcing his way through the increasing darkness. Thin branches swung back at him constantly, scratching his limbs, slicing through his clothing and flesh, leaving faint red marks where blood had escaped his veins.

The sound again. Another cracking twig above, and he came to a halt, turning to the sky. No movement, so he hesitantly moved again, now more aware of his surroundings.

Smaller trees started to emerge, and he found their branches growing lower to the ground, tripping him up as they hid amongst the countless leaves of bushes and weeds around their base. At long last, he pushed through a mass of leaves and emerged on a thin track, a tall, wooden wall stretching out along the path far into the distance.

He rested his head against the wall, breathing heavily, bleeding profusely, and allowed himself a moment to rest. His breathing slowed and his numerous wounds gradually closed over, leaving him blood stained, but uninjured.

The wooden wall rose high into the sky, reaching easily ten yards into the tree tops, too high to climb safely. With a glance down both ways, he chose the left and started the long trek.

The occasional snapping twig in the treetops was replaced with rustling, leaves and branches swaying heavily, but no sign of wind or animal to attribute to it. He grew more nervous with each step he took, until finally the land opened up, revealing a wide arc of cleared land leading to a large wooden gate in the wall.

Arkeus stayed his position for some time, unsure of whether to approach or not, but eventually plucked up the courage. He took several steps into the clearing and stopped short.

Two massive creatures, elves to be precise, landed gracefully on the ground before him. They stood up to their full height, easily eight feet tall, and looked down on him with their large, shining eyes. One was female, her hair tied back in a pencil thin pony tail, braided down to her ankles, the other a male, a single tight tail of hair down to his shoulders.

Their faint green skin glowed in the dim light as the male took a step forward and loomed over Arkeus. A thin smile appeared on his face, somewhat menacing.

“What do you mean by coming here, vampire?” the elf asked. Arkeus simply looked up at him, speechless. The elf turned and nodded to his companion. She easily lifted off the ground and into the trees above. Arkeus watched curiously as she leapt over the wall and out of sight.

“I will ask you again,” the elf said. Arkeus turned back to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I have come to speak with your leader,” Arkeus said. He seemed a little confused at the greeting that he was receiving, but held his ground. The elf smirked and stood tall again.

“Very well, you may see our leader,” he said. He turned and walked over to the gate, Arkeus keeping a safe distance behind. He took a better look at his surroundings now, spying two towers either side of the gate, each with several elves staring down at him. He looked back to the elf before him and noticed a long bow wrapped around his body, several arrows hanging from his belt.

The elf looked up to the tower on the right and shouted out something. Arkeus recognised it as speech, a series of clicks and strange sounding words, but had no chance of deciphering it. The elves in the right tower disappeared, and the one before Arkeus turned and smiled at him.

The gate creaked as it inched its way back, slowly revealing the land behind it. Arkeus did not have much time to study it however, as several elves appeared from beyond and surrounded him. His weapons were removed and he was pushed to the ground, despite his protests.

They tied his wrists behind his back and picked him up off the ground, dropping him uneasily to his feet. He shouted at them, desperately trying to free his hands.

“You have no right to treat me this way!” he roared and thrashed his arms about as

much as he could. The elves simply stood back and waited for him to calm down. Eventually, Arkeus gave in to his bonds and surrendered.

"You said you wish to see our leader," the same elf said. "This is the only way you shall do so."

"Very well," Arkeus said and bowed his head ever so slightly. "Then I request you lead me to him."

The elves parted and allowed Arkeus and his captor to pass through the gate, which closed slowly behind them with a heavy thud. He turned back to get one last look, searching for a way that he may escape if he need to, but found none.

His attention turned to the land around him, studying the city that the elves had created amongst the dense growth of Kilana. The buildings, every last one, were entirely circular, straw thatched roofing protecting the occupants from the weather. Each one was built either beneath the trees or wrapped around them, climbing high into the sky.

As he looked higher into the canopy, he found that the structures were build almost as high as he could see, resting on massive branches reaching far out from the trunks. Connecting all the buildings were stairs of branches climbing in spirals around the trunks and gang planks stretching from one tree to the next, a maze of timer.

His intrusion was not going unnoticed, and many elves were emerging from the buildings above and around, closing in on him. They were of many different sizes and ages, from the very elderly to young children still much shorter than himself, all mingling with the men and women, each carrying their own bow. Several elves felt it necessary to draw their weapons and rested a cautious hand on an arrow in their belt, watching him closely as he passed.

The female elf that had met him outside the gate dropped from the trees above and quickly whispered in the other's ear, then turned back to him for a moment. He studied her features better. Her ears grew tall and narrowed to a point, her hair was thin and dark and carefully braided to reach down to her ankles. Her clothing was simple, plain cloth wrapped around her waist and her chest.

She turned away from him, and he looked sheepishly to the ground. When he returned his gaze forward, he found that they had reached the center of the city. A massive tree, easily five times the size of the largest he had seen, grew higher into the sky than any other.

Around its base twisted a mass of branches growing out and up to provide a stair and balustrade winding high into the trees above. The male elf moved first, followed by the female and himself, then their crowd of intrigued followers. They moved in single file, climbing higher and higher, passing many small structures on their way.

As they finally reach their destination, the balustrade reached far out from the trunk, accommodating a large building and balcony. The two elves stepped to the side and motioned for him to enter the building through the open door. Arkeus glanced at them suspiciously, but proceeded into the building.

The room is massive, delving into the tree trunk itself, and reaching in a long arc away from it. Positioned around its outer edges are several elves, each with simplistic face paint in strange patterns. They stared at him without making a sound as he moved further into the building.

He studied the tree trunk and found that there was a shaft running right through it, several ropes hanging from high above and reaching deep down, assumedly to easily transport goods between the different levels of the tree.

He finally came to a stop near the center of the room and looked up expectantly at a circular hole in the ceiling. The room fell silent as more and more elves gathered around the windows, peering in curiously. Arkeus attempted to ignore their presence and focus on the matters at hand, but could not help but glance back at them.

Through some of the windows, he spied hanging cages, some still occupied by living elves, others by remains of strange creatures. The prisoners, too, were peering through their wooden bars at the newcomer. The elves' patience started to wane, and chatter began among the crowds.

One of the guards at the edge of the room called out loudly, causing the noise to cease. He then shouted out in a similar tongue to the elf at the gate, barely moving. The entire woods fell into a great silence, even the animals not daring to make a sound.

As if out of the air itself, a massive elf appeared before Arkeus. He was easily nine feet tall with long black hair. As he rose, Arkeus noticed that he was far more built than the average elf, his muscles bulging in his arms and legs. He rubbed his long hands together and looked down at Arkeus, taking a step towards him.

"What have we here?" he asked himself quietly, slowly pacing around the intruder. He smirked as he circled him and returned to face him.

"What is your name, vampire?" the elf asked. Arkeus looked at him curiously, frowning as he took in his image.

"You are not the leader of these people," he retorted. "I demand that you bring me your true leader!" he shouted and looked around at the elves surrounding them.

He was struck hard and fast in the face, forcing him to the ground. He groaned and rolled so that he could get to his feet and looked at the elf again. The elf had struck him, and now stood back, his fist held tightly.

"I am the leader of these people, vampire, whether you accept it or not," he said softly. Arkeus spat a small amount of blood and looked sideways at the elf leader. They stayed in silence for a moment, studying each other.

"I am the elf leader Gelathios, and I have been the leader of these people for several years now," he announced. Arkeus narrowed his eyes and stared at the elf before him.

"You have passed into our woods, Kilana, and found your way into our city of Onos, but you have not been invited to do so," Gelathios continued. "This is a crime that our people deem punishable by death." Arkeus stared at the elf again before finally speaking.

"I demand that you release me, elf," he said coldly. Gelathios smiled and looked around the room at the elves stationed at its walls, then beyond to the people crowded around in the trees.

"And if I refuse your demands?" Gelathios teased. "You are in no position to make such requests, vampire. Though I will admit, we do not plan to kill you." Arkeus held back a laugh and shook his head in disbelief.

"You think that I should fear you or your people?" he asked. A gentle laugh escaped his lips. "Your people do not have the strength to slay me, and you do not have the courage." He stared at Gelathios, silently daring him to make a move. The elf simply smiled in return.

"Before I release you, you must tell me your intentions," Gelathios explained. "You must tell me where you are travelling and what you intend to do once you arrive. Only then shall I release you. If you continue to defy my requests, you shall be caged like them." He pointed through the window to the elves hanging in the trees outside.

"I shall answer your questions when you answer mine," Arkeus replied. Gelathios, curious, looked back at the vampire. "And what questions might they be?" he asked.

"Where is Dolaris?" Arkeus asked. A murmur spread through the crowds, but quickly fell silent as they awaited Gelathios' response.

"Dolaris was a traitor to our people and a traitor to our allies," he said simply. "As a result, he has been stripped of his rank. He was hung, his head removed, and his body burned."

Arkeus stood completely silent and stared at Gelathios who simply smiled in return. "Have you any other questions for me?" the elf asked. Arkeus paused as he considered what he had been told.

"When did this occur?" he asked softly. "Mere days after your last encounter with him," Gelathios replied. "He was discovered by several of our spies, as the council were not

certain where his alliances lied.”

“And what were his crimes?” Arkeus demanded. Gelathios took a moment to consider his answer before speaking. “He was charged with consorting with men, werewolves, and vampires, conspiring against the city of Onos and its people, and endangering the city of Onos and its people.” Arkeus bowed his head for a moment and considered his options.

“Is this all that you wish to know from me?” Gelathios asked. He smiled warmly at the vampire, somewhat infuriatingly. “He was given a trial amongst his peers, his execution was legal among our people.” Arkeus sighed and looked at the elf.

“Very well, what is it that you wish to know from me?” he asked. The elf smiled broadly and looked down at him, starting to pace around him again.

“One thing that Dolaris refused to admit to was his plans with the group you know as Contempus Orcanus, and what he had promised to provide the group in the future. One can assume quite safely that he was discussing such things with you. Which brings me to my question. What are you doing here?” Arkeus thought about this long and hard.

“Dolaris had agreed to have an army ready for use by Contempus Orcanus, that they would be ready to deploy whenever they were called upon, and that they would fight to their last breath in the name of our cult,” Arkeus explained. He was visibly distressed at admitting this.

“Very good. Now what were your intentions with this army? You are a vampire after all, are you not associated with the group Ordo Extraho?”

“I have been among their ranks for most of my life, but they stand for lies and betrayal. Rakah’s people demand that the truth be revealed.” Gelathios cocked his head at Rakah’s name, and Arkeus quickly realised his mistake.

“You work for Rakah L’Sterah?” Gelathios asked. Arkeus frowned and bowed his head.

“Not exactly,” he said softly. “I work for Tarina Syr.”

Again, a murmur spread through the elves, but failed to diminish this time. Gelathios looked around and held his hands up, calling for silence. When it eventually came, he turned back towards the vampire.

“Tarina Syr, the vampire?” he asked slowly. Arkeus looked him in the eye and nodded. Gelathios scratched his chin as he walked up and down the room, deep in thought. He eventually returned to Arkeus to speak with him again.

“So what are your intentions,” he asked, apparently forgetting the earlier conversation. Arkeus was taken by surprise, but took the opportunity to leave the subject behind.

"I plan to travel north, over the ranges. I fear that the first of the ancient tombs has been opened, and I aim to arrive at the next before anyone else can," he said. Gelathios laughed.

"The tomb has indeed been opened, vampire, and the creature within now walks. You intend to travel to the next? As would it, and it can move much faster than you can." Gelathios laughed heartily again, looking through the crowds as they did the same.

Arkeus' grew angry at their insolence, and used all his strength to break his bonds, finally freeing his hands. He lunged at the elf, thrusting his claws with as much force as he could muster.

Gelathios saw the attack coming and deftly dodged him, clutching his clothing as he passed and throwing him hard into the floor. Arkeus groaned and managed to get to his feet, much to the amusement of the crowds.

"Why would you attack me when I have already assured your safety?" Gelathios asked, confused but amused. Arkeus refused to speak, glaring at the vampire as he gradually circled him.

"I demand that you honor my arrangement with Dolaris!" he shouted and lunged at the elf again. Once more, his attack was easily avoided, and he was thrown hard to the floor.

"My friend, if you continue this attack on me, despite how entertaining it is, you will not even leave this city," he said between chuckles. Arkeus pushed himself to his feet again and shook his head as he started his path again.

"You can rest assured that Tarina will be informed of your refusal to cooperate with us," he warned. Again, Gelathios could do nothing but laugh.

"Do you not know anything of elves? Our blood is immune to your bite, just as it is immune to a werewolf bite. Your strengths over the rest of the people of Kri may be incredible, but to an elf, you are simply a man that drinks blood." He beamed at Arkeus and held his arms out wide. "But if you wish to prove me wrong, please, go ahead."

Arkeus considers his options, but comes to the conclusion that he would do best to accept their demands. He loosens his body and comes to a stop, standing facing Gelathios once more.

"You have made a wise decision vampire," Gelathios said and lowered his arms. "You would also be wise to now leave our city."

"And where shall I go? I am not equipped to travel north on my own," he said.

"You could return to Kryall and assist your people with the fight against the wolf threat.

I believe that their cause is a little pointless now," Gelathios replied.

"What do you mean pointless? The order are fighting to leave the sleeping beasts alive, they could be released at any time."

"And the first has been."

"But we can still stop the rest from rising."

"Can you fight something that is made of the gods themselves?"

Arkeus stopped to think. "How is the battle faring then?" he asked.

"The city of Me'Thora has fallen to Contempus Orcanus, and Kryall has taken heavy losses," Gelathios replied. "Our latest reports from our scouts tells us that the order has little hope of surviving."

Arkeus frowned. "Then your suggestion to return to Kryall is simply a ruse to get myself killed," he replied.

"On the contrary, we don't really care whether you live or die, we simply want you removed from our city. If our location is revealed to the ancients, we shall be in danger. If, however, we are left in peace, our city is well enough hidden that they shall not find us."

Arkeus found something useful in his words. "Then it is in your best interest to ensure that I arrive safely," he said. Gelathios frowned as he realised his mistake.

"I plan to travel north, to the lands of Tarlos, to attempt to meet up with Tarina. It is my request that you offer me several of your soldiers to escort me in case of an attack," Arkeus said carefully.

Gelathios smirked. "Well played, vampire. Your kind may not be as stupid as they look. Very well, you may have three of my soldiers and no more." He ambled over to one of the windows, the elves filling it quickly parting. He leaned out and called out a string of strange sounding words, then slowly returned to the center of the room.

His call was gradually returned, as voices trailed in from outside, shortly followed by the elves themselves. The three walked over to them, considerably shorter than Gelathios, and bowed their heads as they stopped. They each looked down at Arkeus and smirked.

"You may travel with these three soldiers. They will assist you in any way they deem necessary. If, however, you request something of them that puts them in a deadly situation, they will return here without second thought. Do you understand?" Gelathios

asked.

Arkeus nodded and looked among them. "And these are your best soldiers?" he asked.

"These are the ones that were willing to travel with you," Gelathios replied. "If that is not enough, then you can leave with none."

"Then I suppose they shall do," he said and turned. He slowly made his way over to the door, but turned back as he reached it.

"Why, if you refuse to have contact with men, do you know so much of what is happening in their world?" he asked slowly. Gelathios smiled at him.

"What is about to happen will affect our entire world, vampire, not just yours. If these creatures are permitted to leave their tombs, then we shall be in great danger as well."

Arkeus chuckled and pushed the door open. "So you do fear vampires," he said simply.

"No, I fear the gods," Gelathios replied.

They stood staring at each other for a short while before Arkeus passed through the door and started down the long stairs. The three elves cautiously made their way after him.

They slowly make their way down the stairs and reach the soft ground below. As Arkeus moves around the tree, he finds Gelathios standing before him, blocking his way.

"What do you intend to do when you find the tomb?" Gelathios asked.

"That is none of your business, elf," Arkeus replied. He pushed past him and continued on his path, only to find the elves that were to accompany him refused to follow. He sighed and turned back to look at Gelathios.

"Tarina believes that she can slay the beasts without opening the coffins," he explained. "Do not ask me anything else, as I do not know."

To his delight, Gelathios nodded to the two elves and watched them pass him. They joined Arkeus and the four turned towards the gate.

As they made their way through the city for the last time, the elves gathered around them and parted as they grew closer and closer to the border. The massive wooden gate parted as they approached, and the three elves leapt into the trees on the other side.

They moved almost catlike, leaping from branch to branch with amazing precision and balance, leaving Arkeus to struggle through the brush below.

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