

An Elven Interlude Part I: Dreams & Droga

By Stuart Emmerman

Skylana awoke with a start. She panicked for a moment when she did not immediately recognize the small camp that she and Ryder had set up in the woods just outside of Bristol. She eased a bit when she saw Ryder sitting nearby, tending the fire.

“You look cold,” Ryder said, seeing that she was awake. “Why don’t you come closer to the fire.” Sky’s muscles were shivering, but it was not from the chill in the air. Her dream had left her tense and shaken. She had seen a village burning, children screaming, destruction everywhere and the Paragons powerless to stop it. However, the vision was not clear; it was clouded, obscured, tainted by something... treachery. It lingered like a bad taste on her tongue. She wanted to spit, but thought that unseemly.

“Nim’ohtar?” she asked. “How do we know who we can trust?” Ryder was busy readying himself a pipe to smoke, and was about to dismiss Skylana with a flippant response when he looked up and met her gaze. Her grey-green eyes were filled with worry and fear. He could tell immediately that something was wrong and it would take more than a warm fire and good night's sleep to solve it.

“Have you seen something? Should we have reason to doubt our friends?”

“No... Maybe... I don’t know.” Skylana sighed in frustration. “I’m not sure what I saw... There was a village...”

“Was it Bristol?”

“I don’t know... It... It was burning-”

“IGNIS!! I should have known, that basta-”

“No,” Skylana interrupted. “It was not Ignis. The Fire Master may be pompous and abrasive, but he is pure of heart. This was an act of evil; the Paragons are above such primal hate as this.”

Ryder calmed down and looked stoically at the elf. “What else did you see?”

“The vision was cloudy, hard to make out. It left me with a feeling of... betrayal.” Skylana watched as the Ranger’s eyes widened.

“Well, what do we do?” Ryder asked, checking the sharpness of his blade.

“We must speak to the Elders, their wisdom shall guide us.”

“The Elders? In Atlea?” Ryder exclaimed. “The journey there alone would take nearly two fortnights. By the time we got back it may be too late.”

Skylana thought for a minute. She walked over to her things and dug through her rucksack, emerging with a small book, her tome of magical knowledge: Elen'aduial, The Leaves of the Evening Star.

"I have been working on a new spell," she said, flipping through the pages. "This would be the perfect opportunity to test it."

Ryder approached warily, gazing over her shoulder. He was a bit cautious as he had lived a long life avoiding things like testing unproven spells. While he had confidence in the Elf's abilities, he couldn't help imagining having to spend the rest of his life as a tree frog, (or something else even less desirable.) Finding the right page, Skylana then stood up and walked over to a clearing nearby. She read over the words in her tome several times. Closing her eyes, she then mumbled the words under her breath just to make sure she had them right.

"Gather our things," she said without opening her eyes. Ryder quickly got to his feet and began furiously packing up the camp. He poured some water on the fire, and tied up his traveling sack. Throwing on his quiver, he did a quick checklist in his head and patted himself down to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He then walked up and stood next to Skylana, her eyes were still closed.

"Alright, I'm ready. What exactly is going to happen?" He said.

"If this works, it should take us to Atlea," she replied, still not opening her eyes. "Just stay close, I mustn't have any distractions." Then suddenly to Ryder's surprise, Skylana sprung into action. Dragging her staff on the ground, she encircled them with a line in the dirt. Then, stepping into the center of the circle, she thrust her arms into the air, and began to chant.

"BRING US TO A DISTANT LAND
AT THREE TOUCHES OF MY HAND
MAY OUR PASSAGE THERE BE BLESSED
FOR WE HAVE A DIRE QUEST"

At this she then brought her hands together to clap once above her head, then again down below her waist. Finally she brought her hands outstretched in front of her and as she brought them together to clap for a final time, she yelled,

"TO ATLEA!"

Ryder thought he noticed her glance away at the last second but didn't have much time to think about it as all of a sudden the world turned inside out. Everything dissolved into a cloudy mist and the Ranger felt like he had been punched in the stomach. All the air was pressed from his lungs as he fought to stay conscious. Suddenly, in a somewhat painful relief, everything returned to normal. Ryder found himself face down on a soft mound of grass, the wet dew beginning to seep through his clothes. He pushed himself slowly to his feet and found that he also had a pounding headache to go with his increasing bout of nausea. He looked around but there was no sign of Skylana.

The area of woods he was in was unfamiliar, and it was hard to see through the dark shadows cast by the thick canopy overhead. He called out for the Elf, but there was no reply. When he called again, he got a response that he was not quite expecting. A deep growl sounded from just over the ridge behind him. Turning to look, he saw an enormous bear-like creature, only this beast had skin like a crocodile, and giant ears like a bat. It was a Droga, a fearsome forest animal, magic in nature. The Elves once tried to tame them and teach them to guard their shrines and other holy areas. Unfortunately, this ended with deadly consequences and the creatures were deemed too violent, and were banished from the Elven lands.

Ryder froze, hoping the creature would not detect him, for the Droga have no eyes and rely on their uncanny hearing to search out their prey. The creature let out a deafening shriek, and even though Ryder was standing motionless, the Droga turned right at him. It squawked and started to make a break for the Ranger, who dove out of the way as it came bearing down on him. Jumping to his feet, Ryder loosed 3 arrows in a flash. His aim was true and the arrows struck the creature square in his side. However, the Droga's skin was too tough for the arrows to pierce and they simply clattered to the ground. This seemed only to have angered the beast as it reared back and let go another deafening shriek.

Ryder unsheathed his sword and charged at the creature, ducking below one of the beasts swinging claws and barrel rolling on the ground to get beneath the monster. There, Ryder stabbed at its underbelly, hacking and slashing with his enchanted blade. The creature fought back, swiping and biting. The Ranger then smiled a bit, and a fire lit in his eyes. It was good, Ryder thought, to have some real action after several weeks of scavenger hunts, and having to babysit the fire paragon lest he continue to run his mouth and set the whole of Bristol ablaze with his arrogance. The Droga reared up and Ryder stabbed his sword right under the beast's throat. The creature gasped and gurgled a bit, it hacked and made a wet sounding rasp before finally seizing up and going limp. Ryder threw the creature to the ground and knelt a moment to catch his breath. Then, from behind him, he heard another horrifying shriek. When he looked up on the ridge, he saw that there were now three more Droga sniffing at him and growling.

Panicking slightly, Ryder took a step back and readied himself for the fight, which, Gods hoping, would not be his last.

"Come, creatures," Ryder said, leveling his sword. "You wish to taste the might of Aranok?!" Just then a bright light began to shine from behind the creatures, and the three Droga suddenly burst into flames, erupting one by one in a nova of searing light. The explosions were so bright that Ryder had to shield his eyes from them. When the light faded, and he managed to blink all the spots from his vision, Ryder saw Skylana bounding down from the ridge, where the Droga had previously been standing.

"What took you so long?" Ryder said, throwing a half smile at the Elf. She merely smirked and wiped a piece of stray Droga off her shoulder. It was then that Ryder noticed that he had been covered in blood and gore from the exploding beasts, yet Sky managed to stay completely clean save for that small piece. The wonders of Elves, he thought.