

## An Elven Interlude Part II: Distractions and Defenses

by Stuart Emmerman

After checking the position of the stars and conversing a bit with the trees, Ryder and Skylana were able to determine that they were only about a half days walk from the Gates of Atlea.

“So... What went wrong?” Ryder finally asked as they had begun hiking through the forest. “Why didn’t the spell work?”

“The spell worked just fine.” Skylana replied curtly. “I just... I got a little distracted is all.”

“Distracted? How?” Ryder looked over at the Elf and noticed her ears turning bright red. She stopped walking and looked a bit sheepish.

“The Moon was shining so brightly,” Skylana said excitedly. “I could feel its warmth on my face. As I was chanting the spell, I got lost in its radiance and found myself unconsciously glancing towards it.” Ryder rolled his eyes a bit and mused to himself about Elves again. “The slight deviation must have just thrown us slightly off course.”

“Perhaps from now on,” Ryder said, “we should find a nice shaded area for you to cast spells in. You know, just to be safe.” Ryder smirked as Skylana’s nose crinkled and she clubbed the Ranger on the shoulder with her fist. They continued on their way, Sky trying to ignore Ryder as he kept teasing her about not wanting to end up in places like Pompeii or Atlantis.

It was about mid afternoon when they finally reached the outskirts of the great Elven city. However, things were not as they expected. The forest was unnaturally quiet, there were no animals or birds around anywhere. Ryder shifted uneasily and grasped his sword a little tighter. He glanced over at Sky and could tell that they were both thinking the same thing. *Where was everybody?* After walking for about an hour they could see the mighty gate in the distance and began quickening their pace. As they got closer Ryder could just make out the inscription. When he saw those familiar words of sanctuary, he relaxed a bit and allowed himself a small sigh of relief.

“RYDER LOOK OUT!!” Sky shouted as a large ball of crackling red energy came flying straight for the Ranger. Ryder dove out of the way as it nearly took off his head, crashing into a tree behind him, and erupting in a furious blaze. Ryder looked up at Skylana, “The City’s defenses have been activated,” she said. “We need to get out of here now!” But, it was too late. Ten more balls of energy launched forth from the parapets lining the tree-walls. Ryder and Sky scrambled, heading in two different directions as they both tried to evade the fiery blasts.

Two searing hot globes of energy whizzed over Ryder’s head as he dove for cover under a small grassy embankment. Lightening fast, Ryder unsheathed his bow and strung it with practiced skill. He nocked an arrow and peeked over the small hill. He couldn’t see Skylana anywhere, but

he saw three large orbs circling around to bear down on him. He released an arrow; it flew like a bird at its prey, intercepting one of the orbs only about 25 yards from the Ranger. As the arrow struck its target, the orb exploded into a shower of flames and smoke that was so bright Ryder had to shield his eyes from the blast. In a blur of hands and feathers, Ryder bombarded the attacking orbs with a flurry of projectiles, detonating each one till he had cleared the area around himself.

He could see Skylana now; she was being pursued by a few of the orbs. As she ran through the forest one of them swooped low for her head, she ducked it easily by dive-rolling out of the way. Then another swooped low, she sprang out of her roll and banked herself off a tree, flipping in the air and letting loose a handful of rocks that she had managed to swipe from the ground. The rocks flew straight at the two orbs as they were wheeling around for another attack. They exploded, and Skylana landed gracefully next to Ryder. The pair stood back to back as another half dozen fiery orbs surrounded them. Ryder felled a few more with his arrows, but for every one he destroyed a new one was ready to take its place. Then, just as it began to seem a bit dire, the orbs vanished, evaporating into nothingness.

Ryder looked over at Skylana quizzically; the Elf just shrugged, but then a familiar voice sounded over the wind.

“Ho! Nim’ohtar, Lady Softbreeze! My apologies on the somewhat less than hospitable welcome.” A tall Elf with long chestnut hair came hurrying from the gate. He was wearing golden armor, and carried a large halberd adorned with crystals and etched in Elven scrawl. It was Te’Jin the Captain of the Guard. He stopped in front of the pair and bowed his head. “Again, my apologies about the defenses, legions of the undead were spotted marching North passed the city, so we had to put Atlea on lockdown. They mostly just moved passed our borders, but we had to take every precaution.” Ryder and Sky exchanged worried looks.

“We’ve come to speak to the Elders. We require their wisdom on a very urgent matter.”

“Yes, I know,” replied Te’Jin. Seeing their confused looks, he continued. “The Arch-Druid felt your arrival and sent me to greet you.”

“You could’ve come out before the defenses tried to kill us,” quipped Ryder sarcastically.

“Again, I am sorry,” Te’Jin said honestly. “We did not think you would arrive so soon. We had not yet had time to prepare.” Ryder harrumphed, but Sky was gracious and accepted the Captains apology. “Unfortunately, the Elders are stayed for at the moment, but they will be able to meet with you later tonight in a formal council. Lady Softbreeze,” Te’Jin continued, as he assumed a much more official posture. “I was also told to send you directly to the Oaklymb Enclave. The other Druids there require your immediate assistance.” The Captain then turned on his heel and led the way as the pair followed him through the giant gates to Atlea.