

## **An Elven Interlude The Final Chapter: Demons and Disciples**

by Stuart Emmerman

Ryder and Skylana met back up outside the Grand Hall, after greeting each other and exchanging stories, they headed in. The Grand Hall was large, shaped with bended trees, all twisted and entwined to form the enormous structure. Inside, large standards and crests hung from the “rafters,” each one representing a certain Elven tribe, or friendly nation. Ryder noticed the crest of his own family hanging in one of the far corners; he tried not to linger on it. Side by side, they strolled down the long aisle. Lengthy wooden tables, normally filled with Elves ready for feast, sat empty, this was to be a private meeting.

At the end of the hall there was an elevated table with three seats. Upon them sat the Tribunal, the wisest Elves in this realm of the world. On the right was Falahaim, the Arch-Druid, intimidating with his stone features and stark antlers. On the left was Priestess Ava’ryl, beautiful and delicate, her skin was like porcelain, and her hair like golden silk. She was a daughter of the moon goddess, and most skilled at the practice of magical healing and soothing. The center seat, however, was filled by the oldest and wisest being known to the Elven world, The Grand Elder, Nordoff. He sat hunched in his chair, his long fingers curled around the armrests. While the other two elders looked directly at the approaching pair, Nordoff stared into the distance, his eyes clouded and unseeing. The natural fairness of the Elves having long abandoned him, the old Elf’s ears drooped and sagged in long arches around his loose, wrinkled jowls.

Ryder made to begin speaking, but the ancient Elf raised his bony hand to stop him.

“I know why you have come... Erador, son of Eraton.” Ryder winced at the mention of his father. “The Dreamwalker treads in shadow...” He turned and gazed at Skylana with his sightless eyes. “I have seen what you have seen, young Druid. Your dreams are clouded with mistrust...”

“Old Father, please.” Skylana pleaded. How do we know who to trust? We have been betrayed before.”

“I learned long ago...” Nordoff wheezed. “If one just asks the wind... and beseeches the trees... One will find the answer...” The old one then lifted his head to the sky and closed his eyes. The bent trees that made up the roof to the Grand Hall began to part and rays of afternoon sun came pouring into the lodge, bathing the area around the group in a bright orange hue. Ryder squinted against the light, but Skylana just closed her eyes and basked in its warmth. Then the trees began to sway and Ryder could swear he heard a soft song on the breeze. Small leaves started to fall from the opening in the roof, golden in color, they bobbed and fluttered as they fell to the ground. Then the Grand Elder lifted his arms, extending his hands to the sky. The wind shifted and started blowing all the leaves in a furious vortex. They churned and spiraled, then with a forceful whoosh! They all landed neatly in a pile in front of the old Elf.

Nordoff opened his milky white eyes and looked down at the small mound of leaves. Quite pleased with himself, he smiled and plopped himself back into his chair, and promptly nodded off. As he did, the trees began folding in and enclosing the structure once more.

The Elder, Ava'ryl, Priestess of the moon, stood up. She motioned to the leaves.

"These are the Leaves of Mello'nae. They carry an Elven blessing, only those true of heart can wear them.

"But, My Lady," Ryder interjected. "How will we know-"

"Do not worry yourself, Ranger. The leaves will tell you to whom they belong. Now," the Priestess continued, "along with the Leaves' natural enchantment, may I also offer this blessing of protection." Ava'ryl pushed her arms out in front of her and a pulse of glowing energy infused the small pile of golden leaves with a vibrant aura. "It will shield the wearer from harm and dark energies." The Lady Elder then bowed her head, and took her seat.

Falahaim then stood up, so forcefully that his chair screeched as it was pushed out behind him.

"I don't usually like the Elves to get caught up in the affairs of Humans," he spat out and stared straight at Ryder. "It has never ended well for us. Regardless, the Old Father has given you his blessing and so shall I. Not to mention, after Skylana's earlier display, she is owed the gratitude of the Druids." Falahaim held his long arms extended to his sides. He chanted something in an ancient Elven dialect and clapped his hands together. The resulting crack lit the room with a blinding flash, Ryder could feel the force from the old Druid's hands against his face. Nordoff shifted a bit in his chair but did not awake. The light faded, and the leaves hummed with a residual energy. "I have inscribed them with gift of the forest. May it watch over the bearer, imbuing them with the will of the Fae." Falahaim motioned for the pair to take the leaves. Ryder gathered them in a small scarf and bundled it. "Now, return to the Human lands, you have much left to do there. Farewell, and may thy paths be green and the breeze on thy back." Falahaim then picked up an old staff that had been resting against the table. He raised it high in the air, then brought it down with a crashing THUD!

Ryder felt his stomach fall away, the world became dark and he found himself and Skylana standing just outside their small camp near the outskirts of Bristol.

"Not much for goodbyes, are they?" Ryder joked to the Elf. Skylana just shrugged and giggled a bit.

"What's the matter, Ranger?" a shrill voice called out from over Ryder's shoulder. In the clearing stood three cloaked figures in masks. Two of them were brandishing swords. The other one, maybe female, was chanting and waving her arms in big circles. "Do you think the Draco Disciples so foolish as to not be able to follow a trail of smoke in the air?" Ryder cursed himself, he had expected to be gone for several days, otherwise he would not have doused their campfire with water when they took leave. "I would have expected more from a Ranger." Ryder pulled his sword, Ara'nok, and charged at the group. Suddenly there was a large crash and Ryder was

thrown backwards off his feet. The Draco mage had finished her summoning and three Droga now stood in between them and their attackers. The ground beneath the growling Droga was still smoking from residual magick.

“ATTACK!! KILL THEM!!” the Mage shouted. The Droga turned for Ryder and Sky and charged. The two barely had time to jump out of the way as the three beasts came barreling down at them. Ryder slipped on the wet grass, and one of the creatures slammed into him hard, knocking the wind from the Ranger’s lungs. Skylana did a back flip and came down on the limb of a high tree. From there she targeted one of the Droga and launched a ball of seething magick right at it. The beast melted instantly into a pile of goo and bones.

“Ryder, watch your back!” Skylana yelled, as one of the Draco attackers had come up on him from behind. Ryder raised his sword just in time to nearly miss losing his head, and deflected the attacker’s blade. Ryder rolled up to his feet, and the two of them continued to exchange blows. Meanwhile, Skylana was trying to target the last two Droga who were now keeping their distance from her. She continued to fire at them completely unaware of the second Draco swordsmen directly below her. The assassin grabbed at her ankle and yanked the Elf from the tree. She landed hard but was on her feet in seconds. The Draco tried to hold and restrain her. Skylana spun her staff, knocking his sword away and driving the end of it into his gut. She then pivoted on her foot and swung her staff around, clubbing the man into unconsciousness.

When Skylana got over to Ryder he was still fighting the Disciple. The Ranger swung for the man’s head but he ducked and shoved Ryder into a tree holding him there, pinning him down. Ryder saw Skylana approach from behind the attacker, she was chanting something. But she wasn’t paying attention, there was a Droga running up on her from behind. She was concentrating on the spell and didn’t notice it. Ryder tried to warn her, but he could not get the words out with the Draco’s blade at his throat. Suddenly the pressure gave way as the man who had been trying to kill Ryder was abruptly transformed into a small furry kitten.

“Skylana DUCK!” Ryder yelled as he grabbed one of his new Fire arrows and loosed it right into the Droga’s stone-like skull. Skylana dove for cover as the beast erupted into a giant column of flame that engulfed the Droga and consumed it entirely. “Hal’min, you’re amazing,” Ryder said to himself.

Ryder and Skylana then approached the mage cautiously. She had shielded herself in a protective barrier.

“You are right to fear me, fools. For I command the will of the Demon Beasts!” She waved her arms and a deafening screech sounded from the forest. The last Droga came running from the bush, charging right for the two adventurers. Skylana jumped away to evade its charge, but Ryder held his ground. Right before the creature was upon him, he loosed an Ice arrow at the Beast. The arrow struck true and the Droga tumbled as its limbs locked tight. The beast was immersed in a wave of blue energy, turning its flesh and bone into a crystal-like icy block. It skidded on the ground with a high velocity. Ryder dove out of the way. The frozen Droga slid past the Ranger and headed right for the Draco mage.

“NOOO!!” The mage cried as she tried hopelessly to get out of its path. She could not, however, and the iced demon beast collided with her and then came to a drastic halt as it slammed into a large tree. Ryder started to say something funny but was interrupted when he saw Skylana being held from behind with a sword at her neck. The Draco that she knocked out before had woken up and grabbed the Elf when she was distracted.

“Are you ok? The Ranger asked Skylana. She nodded. Ryder then drew a poison arrow from his quiver with a practiced speed and tossed it to the Elf. She caught it and swiftly jammed it into the attacker’s foot. He cried out and made to cut the Elf, but then his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he began foaming at the mouth. He fell against Skylana and she let out a shriek before pushing him to the ground. His skin turned black and boils formed all over his body. All the moisture seemed to suck away from him and he was left as a shriveled husk lying in the dirt.

“Remind me to send Hal’min my thanks,” Skylana said dusting herself off. “Uggh, and my cleaning bill,” she added, noticing a spot of Droga goo on her boot. She and Ryder then gathered what was left of the bodies, piled them up, and hung the Draco’s masked robes from makeshift pikes in front of the gates of Bristol with a sign attached that read,

For the Sherriff and his Lady-

Thank you for the gift, but its not our fit.

- R&S

Ryder and Skylana then went about finding themselves a new camp to settle into. For now they required much rest before the gates to Bristol opened again.