

Elder Worlds
Sample
by
Seth Kerin

Book 1
Concourse

Prologue

Autumn had always been Ryan Rose's favorite season. There was something about the air on chill weekend mornings in October that was almost magical. He couldn't put his finger on it - never had been able to, but there it was nonetheless. It was an intangible feeling of energy, as though the dying leaves permeated the air itself with their life force. He took a deep breath in, his nose tingling with the scents, the cold, and that energy. This was what he lived for at this time of year.

Ryan made his way along the path that only he could see, having been through this particular stretch of woods more times than he could count. He was a half hour trek from his house in Middletown, Vermont, still well within familiar territory, and feeling great. He longed for weekends like this that allowed him the freedom to roam the woods, and when those weekends arrived, he never let them slip by.

It was his senior year of high school, the end was in sight, and things had not gone horribly. Sure, things could have been better, but he had grown considerably over that last summer, gaining nearly three inches and putting on fifteen pounds of muscles from his unending hikes, and such was enough to at least grant him a little respect from the other guys at school. They had begun looking for someone else to push around. Yes, he thought, things were getting better all the time.

Ryan stopped suddenly, noting the four point buck that was staring back at him from some thirty feet off. He hadn't been making straight for it, which probably explained why it hadn't bolted. He smiled broadly as he stared at the animal, watching as it observed him in turn. Its tail twitched and its ears flicked, but Ryan didn't think this beast was nervous. Oh no indeed, he thought, this one is too much like me. Come of age and ready to take on the world! Reveling in the morning sun as it sent flickering shadows on the forest floor through the stubborn leaves that had hung on through two weeks of chill and windy weather. Ryan knew this buck was, on some metaphysical level, an extension of himself.

Bullshit, he thought, almost laughing aloud at himself. Sure it was a fine animal, a wonderful specimen of nature, but there it ended except in his own subconscious thoughts that, try as he might, Ryan couldn't quite beat down.

A few more moments of their staring contest, Ryan thinking for a moment that the buck might charge him, and the creature turned its white tail toward him and regally walked off into the woods.

You're okay, human boy, but not worth my time.

Ryan grinned again, his over-active imagination reveling in the freedom he allowed it when he was out here on his own. Not like anywhere else. Too often it got him in more trouble than it was worth, but out here imagination could do no real damage.

Adjusting his pack, he began to set off again, his urge to sit in his favorite spot growing as the fringes of an idea for a new story tickled the edge of his brain. He had his notebook, a brand new one, and his camera as well - a cheap old Canon manual. It took nice pictures though, and he had three rolls of film in addition to the half-finished roll that was already in the camera.

With a final glance in the direction the buck had went Ryan renewed his trek, knowing this section of forest well enough to walk it blindfolded. Trusting in his senses not to get him lost, Ryan allowed his mind to drift into the story idea. Slowly the pieces of the fiction began to take shape from his known world.

It would take place in a high school, not unlike Middletown High School.

He would try a creepy story – fantasy was his mainstay, but he wanted to experiment with horror.

At the end of his junior year he and a few friends, the few friends he had, snuck into the school's basement. It was a huge maze of pipes and concrete – dark, dank and creepy – a perfect setting.

Near the entrance to the basement were a series of dirt mounds. There were six in all, evenly spaced in two rows. His friends had joked that it was the janitors' graveyard, and that idea had sparked Ryan's horror story into motion.

Zombies. Dead janitors raised by a group; a cult. A cult of students.

On and on the details came, beginning with the spark of his friend's off-hand statement until it became a raging inferno of ideas. It would have to be pared down of course. Already he was picking through the bits of storyline that were irrelevant. It was a short story, not a novella, and he needed to keep it crisp, yet detailed. He wanted whoever read it to be chilled to the bone.

For a moment, Ryan let the flames die down. He knew to make the story good he had to keep it real. He had to remain within the realm of possibility, even if it was the extreme possibility of zombies. Of course he knew from his avid reading that if he could suck the reader in - could trap them in his contrived reality - then he could hit them with the unthinkable and get away with it.

Writing the story had to be the same as baiting a hook.

That was when Ryan heard the report of a gun coming from just over the next rise, reverberating through the forest. It broke the tranquil silence of the woods like a scream in a church, and it happened a second time a moment later. A shotgun, he thought.

His heart pounding, Ryan stood for a moment listening for any more shots, but none came. Thinking that it was merely an over-exuberant hunter, despite being not quite in season, Ryan nonetheless pulled his collapsible tripod from his backpack. It was not the sturdiest thing, but somehow the cool metal was comforting in his grip as he continued his march up the rise.

He knew, reasonably, what he would find on the other side. A hunter would be there, probably with no hint of orange, crouched over a deer - possibly the very same buck Ryan had seen if the creature had doubled back. He was not concerned about being heard, for he was light of foot and took some measure of pride in his ability to avoid dead leaves and windfall branches that might mark his passing.

He would top the rise carefully and avoid being seen. He was not in the mood to be shot - whether by accident or intent. No, he thought, better to wait and watch. The hunter would soon enough carry the carcass away and Ryan could go on with his writing and photography. Maybe, if he felt daring enough, he would shut off his flash and snap a picture of the hunter. A memento of what was already turning into, from his imagination's standpoint, a near-death experience.

Ryan topped the rise, peeking over a fallen log that marked the edge of what had become his domain. His breath caught in his throat as he saw the hunter, very much as he had pictured him with scraggly beard, full camouflage, and black 'shit-kicker' boots. That was where the similarity to Ryan's imagined scenario ended. The hunter was on his back, unmoving, with his shotgun lying across his legs.

Ryan knew, beyond any doubt, that the hunter was dead.

Chapter 1 Revelations

This can't be happening.

That was the one thought that kept going through Ryan's head, repeating itself like a mantra, as he rushed out from behind the toppled tree, quick-stepping over a series of windfall branches. The hunter was just unconscious, he thought. He just fell - tripped on a rock - and his gun went off. That's all. Nothing interesting here, just move along.

As he closed the short distance he considered his small first aid kit. It was little more than a few band-aids, some gauze and some surgical tape, but maybe it would help the hunter. He had bought it at the pharmacy after skinning his elbow on a branch on one of his outings. He had bled the entire trek out of the woods, looking like an embattled soldier by the time he reached his house. At least with the first aid kit he had felt more prepared.

He reached the hunter's side a few breaths later, understanding the moment he saw the man up close that there was nothing he could have done to prepare himself. From his angle on the rise he had been unable to get a very clear view of the man, but one look told him all he needed to know of the hunter's condition.

The left half of the hunter's face was gone. White pieces of skull shone through the mass of blood and gore. The man's brain, what was left of it, was clearly visible in the gap where his eye had once been.

Ryan was amazed that the right side of the man's face was, except for a small spattering of blood, completely undamaged. That was the only thought he managed before his brain fully registered what he was seeing, relayed that message to his stomach, which took offense and caused him turn away and vomit.

Hunched over with his hands on his knees, Ryan continued gagging for several minutes, tears welling up in his eyes. He tried not to think about what he had just seen, but the effort was fruitless as the image flashed itself again and again in his mind. Finally, with his stomach no longer rebelling, Ryan stood upright again, facing away from the corpse.

He took in one deep breath, then another, calming himself and trying to focus on what to do next. He was standing in the woods, at least a couple miles from any roads, with a corpse behind him. What could he do?

At that point a chill ran down his spine and he froze, not even daring to breath. There had been two shots fired, too far apart to be an echo, and there was only one dead man. Ryan dared to look around slowly, pointedly keeping his eyes away from the corpse as he felt his stomach twinge again. There seemed to be no sign of anyone else about, and no obvious indication of an animal that the hunter had shot at.

“Damn,” he breathed, taking a measure of comfort in hearing his own voice break the now eerie silence of the forest.

With another deep breath, Ryan forced himself not to focus on the corpse (*man*, he reminded himself) but rather on the circumstances. This was, after all, his bit of forest. He knew the land here as well as any, and the more he thought about it the more he began to feel comfortable that there was no killer lurking about.

Scanning the layout with a practiced eye, as though looking for a good photography subject, Ryan searched for anything that might shed light on the dead man’s fate. The area that he had so often frequented was a shallow depression. He and the unfortunate hunter were near the center of the bowl, near the stones that Ryan had so often lounged upon. All around were trees, birches, a few maples, and some smaller aspens, but no animals. There were no animals about, though Ryan had often seen squirrels, chipmunks and birds in the area, along with the buck from earlier. Any of those could have been the target of the first shot.

Giving the body a wide berth, Ryan walked slowly toward the rocks, running his eyes over them one by one, searching for any sign of blood. The man might have tripped, causing the gun to misfire. There had to be a clue somewhere. He tapped the tripod against his open palm as an officer might a nightstick, trying to consider every possibility.

Ryan looked at the stones as a whole, noting as he had before, the circular pattern of the rocks. There were twenty-five in all, he had counted them many times, and the southernmost rock was only a few steps from where the hunter was. Ryan could find no indication of blood, but he surmised that his trip/misfire scenario could still hold.

Still, he could not draw himself from the stone circle. He ran his hand nervously through his light brown hair, a nervous tic he had, and went over what he thought he knew.

The circle, he assumed, had been in place for a long time. He had once tried to move one of the stones, but it had proven either too heavy or too settled into the ground to budge. Oddly nothing grew in the middle of the circle, the diameter of which he guessed to be about twelve feet. He had done some research, but had found little that was useful in garnering the origin of the stone circle. He suspected it was probably an old Indian ritual site of sort, but that was the best explanation he had for it.

The place had always seemed so serene to him, both relaxing and thought provoking. It was here where he had written his best work and shot his best pictures. Now the land seemed scarred by the half-faced hunter that lay on the fallen leaves just a few feet away. That garish wound that would haunt his dreams for years, if not the rest of his life. Even now he could not bring himself to look back at the man. The mere thought of doing so made his stomach flip-flop again.

With no way to move the man, and no real desire to do so, Ryan determined his best course was just to hike back out of the woods and call the police. The Middletown cops were not the most useful in the world, but they would listen to his story, and there was no

reason to fear he would be accused of anything. He hadn't (dared) to touch anything on the man, there would be no suspicion of him.

Ryan looked around one final time, his gaze passing quickly over the corpse, never focusing in on it. After replacing the tripod in his pack, flimsy defense that it might have been, he turned and set off the way he had come.

* * *

Ryan had only taken a half dozen steps when he heard what he could only describe as a sort of musical buzzing sound. He looked around quickly, trying to locate the source of the sound, but it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. He did a quick mental inventory of all the forest sounds he was familiar with, but the best he could come up with was bees humming. Even that was not accurate, for the sound was less buzz and more hum. It was both soothing and frightening at the same time.

Ryan . . .

His name. He had distinctly heard his name spoken by the musical buzzing. Every impulse in his seventeen year old body told him to run like hell, yet there he stood riveted in place. He waited, listening again, trying to find a pattern in the hum that might match the inflection in his name - just a trick of the mind, of course.

Ryan . . .

"Shit," he hissed, turning about frantically. It was no trick of the mind. No, that was really his name he heard spoken by a humming musical buzzing something.

He wanted desperately to run, but without knowing where the thing was he might run right into it. Fleeing wasn't the answer. Not yet anyway.

He suddenly realized the panic the hunter must have gone through, similar to his own, perhaps firing blindly into the woods. Ryan forgot all about the hunter as the humming buzz got louder, audibly approaching him, but not visible. All sorts of wild thoughts flashed through his mind: pranksters, aliens, monsters, zombie janitors . . . the list went on and on as the buzzing got louder and louder.

Then it stopped.

Ryan felt like he was being watched. Somehow he knew that he was no longer alone, if he ever was alone to begin with. Slowly, terrified that whatever it was would strike him dead at any moment, he turned around.

* * *

"God damn!" Ryan muttered, hand over his pounding heart as he realized it wasn't some monster about to rip out his innards.

Standing before him was a girl (woman, his mind corrected immediately) stark naked in the chill October morning air. Her skin was a deep tan, and her hair a chestnut brown, cascading half the height of her lithe body. To Ryan's credit the first thing he noticed as he looked her up and down was that she did not even have shoes. Her small, bare feet barely touched the ground, as though she were almost floating. She seemed on the verge of levitation.

The next thing he noticed were her eyes, large almond shaped orbs of a verdant green hue that made his teenage heart skip a beat. It was then he realized that he was staring at this nude woman, her eyes, wise and knowing, betraying her age as much as her figure.

Nervously, Ryan managed to avert his eyes, focusing his gaze entirely on her face (elf-like, he thought, like that Icelandic singer). He stammered something unintelligible,

something along the lines of ‘who are you, where did you come from?’ that came out as a sort of stuttering mumble.

“What?” he managed, his nerves calming with the success of getting a word out. He decided to try for a few more. “Who . . . what are you?”

The naked woman did not answer. Her shoulders twitched just slightly, and Ryan’s eyes opened wider still as though they might try to escape from his head. Leaf-like wings rose up in back of the woman. They were a brownish-red in color, the shade and relative shape of late autumn maple leaves, down to the fragile looking veins that gave them their structure.

Despite being a seventeen year old male standing an arm’s length from a decidedly beautiful naked female, fear kept any wandering thoughts from making their way into Ryan’s consciousness. There was a presence about this woman; a power that Ryan could not expound upon. It was there, palpable, and not just because of her wings, but rather her eyes. Her emerald eyes spoke of knowledge and power that Ryan could not begin to comprehend. She was awe inspiring, yet her very presence terrified him beyond anything he had ever experienced.

Ryan had always considered himself an open-minded kid. He, unlike many in his high school class, had no problem with the few openly gay students. He had no prejudices that he was aware of. He even believed that somewhere in the universe there was more than the world he knew, be it aliens with big eyes or some other intelligent life. He always fantasized that an encounter with something unknown would be an uplifting experience; one that he would jump into without fear or reservation.

Here before him though a leaf-winged female, who aside from the wings at least looked human, was challenging his entire definition of impossible. Ryan began to question his sanity as the surreal encounter continued, the woman seeming to peer into his soul (if he had one - even that basic belief seemed fragile to his mind).

Then she spoke.

Her words were soft as a morning breeze, and slow as though she were testing - or tasting - each word. “You are chosen,” she said, never taking her eyes off of him, as though she were judging his every move; his every reaction.

“Ch-chosen for what?” he asked, wondering if he had fallen and hit his head.

Ryan waited for her to answer. She seemed to be considering the right words to use as though flipping through a foreign language guide book. He half expected her to say “Surprise, you’re on Hidden Camera!”

“You are chosen,” she repeated. “Your aid is required.”

“Um . . . my aid for what?” Ryan asked, not certain that he wanted to know the answer.

She paused for another minute as though searching for the best way to explain herself. “This world is not the only world,” she said, her voice delicate and awkward, as though not used to forming the syllables she spoke. “You are one of many. Accept or decline.”

“And if I decline?” Ryan asked, his confidence growing slightly; beginning to accept at least the reality of what was happening. At least, he thought, if this is a dream I can take some control by accepting that it is a dream.

The woman stared at him as though she couldn’t comprehend him turning down her request (demand) for help. “This world is not ready for others.”

“What kind of an answer is that?” Ryan began to ask, getting only through “What” before realizing the implication. If he did not accept she would have to kill him. The world wasn’t ready to know about naked leaf-winged women. The fear that had begun to fade came raging back in full force as he came to understand that, in all likelihood, she had killed the hunter.

“I accept,” he said, considering only the immediate implications. He would live. He would not end up like the hunter with his brains spread on the fallen leaves. Although he realized that he didn’t have a gun, he believed firmly that it wouldn’t matter if this woman, this creature, wanted him dead.

She regarded him a moment later. Her eyes of brilliant green met his of dusty blue, boring into him like a hypnotist. She was searching for the truth of his answer, he thought. *She will see that I’m accepting only to stay alive and that won’t be enough!* After a long, heart-pounding pause, she seemed to determine that it was enough. Ryan felt the intensity of her gaze lessen somewhat.

“Follow,” she said, turning her back on him and walking back in the direction of the stone circle and the dead hunter.

Ryan watched as she began to walk away, mesmerized by the movement of her red-brown maple-leaf wings. He could see them clearer, growing directly out of her back where her shoulder blades would be. Her chestnut hair cascaded down around her wings, seeming to move of its own accord. His eyes followed down the curve of her back, slowing a bit at her buttocks, and continued down her shapely legs. Her feet were barely a whisper above the carpet of dead leaves, stirring nothing on the ground, leaving no trace of her passage, and making not a sound. She paid no heed as she stepped lightly past the hunter’s body, as though it were no more than a fallen log.

Hastily, lest she notice he wasn’t following her, Ryan began to trace her steps, his own footfalls seeming loud to his ears. She was in the center of the stone circle as he passed the corpse, not daring to glance at it, but unable to ignore it.

“What about him?” he asked, immediately feeling as though he shouldn’t have said anything.

The woman had stopped in the center of the circle of stones while he remained just outside the circle, near the corpse. She turned to face him fully and again his eyes, starting at hers, wandered down the length of her smooth body. He managed to stop his progress just below her hips, snapping his eyes back up to meet hers again. If she noticed his staring, or even cared, she gave no indication. There was no hint of modesty. She simply watched him, again it seemed, searching for unfamiliar words.

“He would not hear,” she said. Her voice seemed to have gained control, as though she were more comfortable with the words. “He would not follow. He intended harm.”

Ryan nodded, understanding on some level what she was getting at. She had spoken to the hunter, perhaps in the same manner as she has spoken to him. He had declined, or perhaps in fear simply taken a shot at her. Whatever happened didn’t much matter. The hunter had declined, by word or deed, and was dead. Ryan had accepted and was very much alive.

“Enter the ring,” she said.

Ryan again felt as though she were growing more confident in her speech, as though in the brief encounter she were learning the language, the inflections and the subtleties. He dared not delay further though, having no desire to follow in the path of the hunter.

He stepped over the nearest stone and into the circle.