

## **An Elven Interlude Part III: Druids and Decay**

by Stuart Emmerman

Skylana gave a last look over her shoulder as she left the Atlean gates behind her, barely able to make out the shrinking forms of Ryder and Te'Jin as they continued to head deeper into the city. The narrow dirt path she walked cut through the Wildwillow Forest and led a twisting trail to the druid enclave just beyond the city limits, the sun was warm on her back as she softly hummed along with the treesong surrounding her. It had been years since the elf had been home, and she was glad to hear the reedy voices of several young saplings added to the deep chorus of the ancient woods. Sky loved spending time out in the human lands, but she belonged where the forest was growing instead of shrinking.

It got dark as she neared the enclave, the willow trees growing thick and close like a living barricade, blocking out the sun. They were enchanted to attack any who dared threaten the druids -- Sky had seen those lovely branches coil snakelike around a goblin's throat and drag him off his feet until all the life was choked from him.

But the forest was at peace today. She was welcome here and the willows swept themselves aside for her, rustling their leaves in a happy greeting.

At first glance, the Oaklymb Enclave looked much like every other part of the forest. There were no buildings, fire pits, or stables to be seen. It took a skilled eye to notice the tree towers, wide columns where several trees grew as one, spiraling around a hollow center and weaving their branches to form natural structures. Sky could not see anyone inside the tree towers at the edge of the enclave, and no sentries posted around the exterior either. The Oaklymb had sent for her, yet no one was here to meet her.

Something was wrong.

"Lo'hel?" she called, hearing nothing but her own muffled footsteps as she crept further into camp. "Hello?"

"Oi!" came a gruff shout, though Sky saw no one ahead or behind her on the road. She winced as an acorn bounced off her skull. "Up here, long ears!" A brownie lay on his belly in the lower limbs of the closest tree, swinging his pointed shoes back and forth in the air.

Sky frowned up at him, rubbing the sore spot on her forehead. "Greetings and good tidings to thee, Master Billy Blin," she said sourly, having learned through many dealings with the Fae that they value politeness above all else - though they rarely conducted themselves with the same amount of decency that they demanded from others. This particular brownie had been living in Wildwillow for as long as Skylana could remember. "Do you know where the druids have gone?"

A white grin spread over Billy Blin's dark face. "Indeed I do! Them long ears 'ave gathered at the Big Tree." Skylana knew he meant the tower of Arch Druid Falahaim in the heart of the enclave, a giant structure made of thirteen trees intertwined together. She dug in her pouch and pulled out a sugar cookie, the only one left from her last trip to the Bristol bakery, tossing it up to the brownie who snatched it out of the air with shining eyes.

"Many thanks," Skylana said, leaving him to enjoy his treat as she headed down to the center of the grove. She came across no one on her way, the town was well and true deserted. The Arch Druid's Tower loomed before her soon enough, so wide as to appear like a cliff wall made of tree bark. She could hear the muffled buzzing of many druids in conversation inside.

"Old friend," she murmured, pressing her hand against the bark, feeling the slow and steady energies surging underneath her palm. "I have business within." There was a low groan of creaking wood as the roots beneath her feet twisted and moved, a yawning crack split by her feet at the base of the tree and grew into an archway wide enough for her to pass under. Bowing her head in respect, she stepped inside.

The entrance opened into a dark tunnel with dirt walls and multicolored mushrooms glowing underfoot, softly lighting the path. Sky always expected it to be hot inside the tree towers, but the air was as cool and fresh as the spring rains. It became easier to see as she reached the end of the tunnel and came to the Hall of the Stag, as the Arch Druid's meeting room was called.

Glowing balls of mage-light hovered near the ceiling, illuminating the huge circular chamber. The entire Oaklymb Clan had gathered here, sitting in hushed groups on the giant shelf mushrooms growing straight from the wooden walls. Every tense face was turned to the thirteen people shouting across a stone table in the center of the floor. The Druids of the High Council. Skylana hung back in the doorway for a moment, her unease growing as she caught snatches of the conversation.

"-blighted earth must be healed-"

"-cannot, our magic is powerless-"

"-the land suffers!"

Arch Druid Falahaim occupied the largest chair, a set of regal antlers sprouting from his brow, piercing the air as he spoke. "Enough!" he thundered, slamming his palm on the table. The members of the High Council fell into a sullen silence, glaring at each other. "The undead have marched beyond our borders, but we feel their presence still. Lake Eminara has been entirely tainted by the zombies. This plague is unnatural, and has resisted all our attempts at purification thus far. If we do not take action soon, the lake will be lost to ruin."

Falahaim's words hit Skylana like a kick to the gut, leaving her breathless and grief-stricken, weakly clutching her staff for support. The plague march, of course... Sky did not understand why the undead were allowed to roam free; all she knew was that they had paid far too dearly at the expense of the zombies. Lake Eminara was sacred to the Oaklymb, said to bless any who waded in her. If those magic waters were so easily befouled, Skylana dreaded to think of the state the Bathurst Basin would be in back at Bristol, let alone Lake Elizabeth. "Stars save us,"

she murmured.

The Arch Druid cast his golden gaze around the meeting hall. “If any of you has an idea, I would be glad to hear it,” he uttered, exhaustion etched in his face. His eyes caught on Skylana hovering in the doorway, and he beckoned to her with a raised arm, gracing her with a weary smile. “Softbreeze, it is good to see you. I would rather have us gathered here in celebration of your return, but alas... misfortune has befallen us.”

“So I’ve been hearing,” Sky replied as she stepped into the room, mind reeling as she scrambled to remember all the known antidotes to toxins. “What have you tried?”

“Everything,” snapped a thin woman seated beside Falahaim at the table, flicking her long white hair in annoyance. “Which you would be well aware of had you been here, instead of gallivanting in the human lands.”

Skylana ignored the gibe with practiced ease. Lumenora had long been afraid that one day the Arch Druid would realize how useless she was and remove her from the high council. It was clear that Skylana was her biggest threat from the way the Arch Druid trusted her with important tasks, like helping with the trouble in Bristol. “Indeed?” she asked, her staff making sharp clicking noises on the floor as she strode to the center of the room. “Have you looked outside druidic magic and rituals?” She was met with stony silence. “No?”

Eyes glinting, she turned to Falahaim. “I have an idea...”