

The Tale of Skylana Softbreeze

by Tracy Keane

Skylana Softbreeze, Sky to most mortals, hails from Wildwillow Grove, a lush forest far to the south of Bristol. Every elf of the Wildwillow Clan leaves the grove on their sixteenth birthday and journeys alone into the woods, spending days or weeks in deep meditation, scrying for their life's purpose. Skylana came back from her spirit walk knowing that she was meant to follow the path of the Druid, and master the art of communicating with animals.

She apprenticed for a time with the Oaklymb Druids, insisting on studying Herbology in addition to Beast Ken (the ability to connect with animals, and influence their thoughts). After many years, and many trials, the Oaklymb Elder crowned Skylana with a circlet of woven reeds and recognized her as a full Druid, naming her Softbreeze for her gentleness and quiet voice.

A druid's first responsibility is to protect the Earth Mother and her creatures -- the time had come for Skylana to strike against the minions of shadow with all of nature's wrath and fury. She did not have to wait long for the first test of her powers. While traveling, Softbreeze came upon a band of ragged-looking gnomes; there was only one among their number who wasn't covered in scrapes and bruises. Their leader, a wizened old gnome named Tokizar, told her that their village had been under constant attack by the dreaded harpy queen, Kali the Hellion. He begged Skylana to help reclaim their home, and that night she set out for the harpy cave.

Softbreeze's knuckles were white around her staff as she padded to the Hellion's Lair, anxiety clawing a pit in her stomach. She hadn't picked up a new weapon since leaving the Oaklymb... for a second the young elf stood in the yawning mouth of the cave, and considered turning back. Then a harpy sentry spotted her and screeched its warning, drawing a chorus of answering screams from within the cave, and the matter was decided. She'd be going up against the Hellion with her apprentice's staff then, though it was bare of gemstones and enchantments.

A wave of calm flowed though the druid as she gave herself over to the Earth Mother, her feet like roots connecting her to the strength of the ageless land. Wrapping both hands around her staff, she raised it up to the angry clouds as if to pierce the heavens. Static crackled on the air, whipped her hair about her face. The staff began to glow between her palms with an electric blue light. Masses of harpies flew out of the cave before her, too many to count, and she smiled.

She aimed her staff at them, and streaks of lightning burst out of its end, hungrily arcing forward to meet the surge of harpies. Where she aimed, the harpies fell, in twitching, blackened heaps. Lost to the frenzy of battle, Skylana worked her way to the back of the cave, ignoring the hoards of gold and trinkets that the harpies coveted so much. The cave opened into a dizzyingly huge cavern, with stalactites dripping water into yellowed, sulfurous pools below.

Kali the Hellion hovered in the center of the room, leathery wings beating regally, a giant scarlet-feathered beast wearing a necklace of skulls. She clutched a crystal-headed staff in the talons of

her forelimb. Skylana eyed it hungrily. The staff was an ancient relic -- no one could say how the Hellion had lain her claws on it, but all agreed that it was the source of her power.

“You are not the first to come here looking to end me, elf,” Kali rasped, pointing her staff at Skylana. The crystal on its end started to glow as the harpy queen invoked her power and screamed. “Now, your death will serve Kal--ahaghagh!” The harpy queen’s speech was cut short as Skylana, always an elf of few words, unleashed a bolt of blue energy from her staff to strike Kali square in the chest. She twitched twice in midair, then the ground shuddered underneath Skylana’s boots as the giant harpy fell, dead.

Skylana hurried across the chamber and pried the Hellion’s staff from her twisted talons. Its wooden base was wrapped with a leather handgrip, encircled with a ring of purple gems near its head, and topped with an obelisk of clear quartz. Feathers and runic charms had been tied on, and tickled her hand as she held it. “Auranel... the Rod of the Ethereal,” she whispered reverently.

Much time has passed since that day, and Skylana has wielded Auranel in countless battles since then, from the slaying of Velyndris Foulcast to the cleansing of Shadowbough, often times fighting alongside a mysterious ranger. Most recently, Skylana’s travels brought her north to Bristol, where she allied with the Lunar Tribe and stood against the dragon Bloodtharken, and lived to tell the tale.

A year ago Skylana Softbreeze stood with her allies as they passed the dragon’s heart among themselves, each taking a long ceremonial drink of the blood of their fallen foe. Summer faded into winter, and it seemed all was well. Then the animals began spreading tales of a disturbance to the north. First a lone wolf told Skylana he had smelled something unnatural in the dark. Then a few rabbits reported the very same, and a herd of deer...

And so the druid walks north again, towards the village of Bristol...